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THAT INHABIT IT, AND EXPERIENCE LIFE BEYOND THE DARKNESS.



front of the book



Judgement is coming...

Creating something from scratch is rewarding but sometimes painfully difficult. An obvious statement, right? Not unless you've really been there in the trenches, putting your everything into your work, watching it turn out as a piece of art—or as an abject failure. To an unrelenting creator, too much of the time there is no middle ground, only the lure of unmitigated success.

The truth is always somewhere in-between, a compromise that is a bitch to accept. I got locked into this internal debate after scrapping the 1000 words I had originally planned for this space, and fortunately had the support of a fellow writer that what I had written was complete crap. Well, not complete crap, but probably more in that in-between zone that made me unhappy. So I scrapped it.

And here I am, round two, fight!

I'm not saying that writing a monthly editorial is somehow soul wrenching or leads to immense rewards of artistic accomplishment; what I'm reminded is that any work we do on something we believe in can go wrong, or go right, or a little of both. Sometimes there's good reason why, other than a bad day, a good day, or dumb luck.

And the hardest part can put putting it out there, for judgment.

Being a critic is about judgment. That's what we do at Play as a job, that's what most of you do with your friends, that's

what I do every day in life—express opinion on other's works and express if it's good or if it's OK or if it's bad and in-between. The process is mostly a crapshoot from where I'm standing, as unpredictable as the process of creation.

If you haven't been told this before, making a video game is incredibly hard work, weighed down by an enormous load of factors that even the gamemakers themselves aren't quite ready to deal with. At E3 this year, I saw so many games from so many genres across so many types of creative intention that I ... well, I felt lost to find one topic that meant enough to me to distill into a 1000 words in a way that made any sense. At least any sense in the moment. Times are ... interesting.

So all this thinking has got me thinking: I want to leave you with five games of this first half of the year you might have heard about, been on the fence about, but really should consider giving a shot. I lay respectful judgment on these games and say: thank you for the pain that went into their creation, and may you smite the haters who don't know better!

World of Goo

Study this for narrative, style and engaging use of the Wii controls.

Flower

Here is how to make a game that gets away from guns and dumb

“I’ve so wanted to experience a Western scenario like this, and it delivered.”

narratives.

inFAMOUS

The evolution of the open-world concept, one giant, wonderful step closer to getting it all right.

Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood

I've so wanted to experience a Western scenario like this, and it delivered with its arresting visual design.

Shadow Complex

Yeah, it's not quite out yet, but I'm stoked for this Metroid in GI-Joe clothing and you should be to. Now go grab Super Metroid from Virtual Console in the mean time.

~Brady Fiechter

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August 2009

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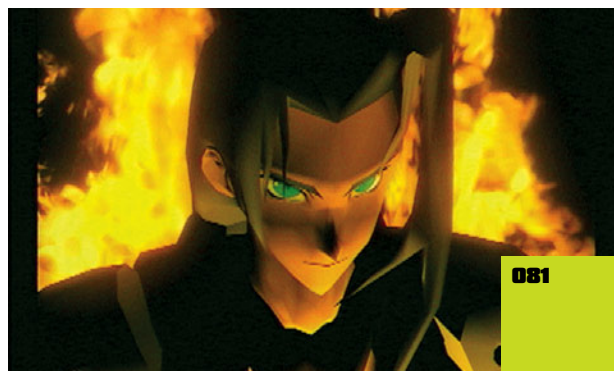


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081

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"STILL LOVE 2D FIGHTING? THEN
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PLAYSTATION: THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

"THE ABSOLUTELY STUNNING
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- OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

4.5 OUT OF 5 - GAMEPRO

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RESONATE WITH FANS AND THE REST OF THE
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- THE NEXT LEVEL

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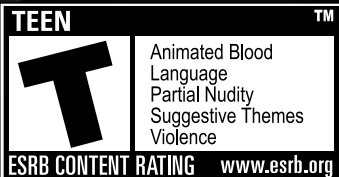


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Air Metal



On Saturday June 20th UK Brütal Legend fans flocked to the Download Festival in Donington Park, to smash the world record for the most people playing air guitar at one time. By the power vested in him by the metal gods lead character Eddie Riggs commanded 440 servants of metal to commence shredding their air-powered axes to the Motörhead classic Ace of Spades and the record fell like a freshly de-brained zombie. An official adjudicator from the Guinness Book of World Records was on hand to authenticate the attempt, which smashed the previous attempt set in 2008 of 318. Brütal Legend doesn't until Rocktober 13th (Rocktober 16th in the UK and Europe) and it's already setting records!

The Dark Age of Mythic

Partly as a result of major layoffs a few months back, on June 24 EA chose to merge Dark Age of Camelot developer Mythic with fairly new acquisition BioWare (itself once a beacon of independent development), forming a single internal "RPG group." In the short term at least, the change will have little impact on either studio; each will retain its identity and staff, and finish its current projects. The only reported casualty is Mythic co-founder Mark Jacobs, who is leaving on apparently genial terms. (Reports suggest that lower staff are nevertheless a bit freaked out.)

The new supergroup is overseen by BioWare's Ray Muzyka; Greg Zeschuk continues on at BioWare as chief creative officer, while Mythic co-founder Rob Denton continues as COO of that wing.

id Finds a New Ego

In similar news, Bethesda parent Zenimax has acquired independent stalwart id Software. Co-founder John Carmack explained that more and more, id was having trouble shopping its games to publishers. The problem is, there are too many other talented people making first-person shooters these days, making id's argument for funding a little trickier.

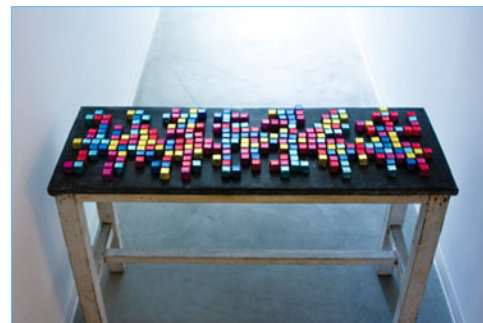
Though they were still doing okay, Carmack decided that id would do best to pull more development back in-house, and grow internally. To chance that, in a climate increasingly hostile to freelancing, would probably mean an acquisition. Of the options, Zenimax seemed the most promising. Bethesda's and id's strengths complement each other without competing; Zenimax is uncannily well-funded; and Carmack was impressed with Bethesda's

Requiem for Mario

In late June, Japanese artist Koshi Kawachi unveiled his newest art exhibit at the gallery "LOWER AKIHABARA." Inspired by the world-famous Nintendo mascot, Kawachi's show, called "Requiem for Mario - the 1,043,020,XXX,XXXth funeral" was a collection of work which drew from Mario Bros. games, reinterpreting their contents and themes in different materials. As stated in the artists' blog, Kawachi creates his pieces using materials or items that are familiar to everyday people in Japan, infusing them with new life and character. Seeking smiles over depth, these pieces give the audience a chance to unburden themselves with their daily lives.



マリオ鎮魂 KOSHI KAWACHI EXHIBITION
第1,043,020,XXX,XXX回告別式 '09.6.5(fri) >> 6.26(fri)
LOWER AKIHABARA.



revival of the Fallout series.

In the short term, the neighbor studios will probably experience little bleed-over, either creatively or technologically. Though Carmack says there will "certainly" be cooperation of some sort, he intends to keep id as separate and distinct as he can. *ERW*

Gaming Gone By File #006

words Eric L. Patterson

Nintendo Fans See Red

How many legitimate failures has Nintendo had when it comes to gaming consoles or portables? Truth is, most people probably couldn't think of a single name to bring up. Even at times when one of their platforms hasn't ruled the generation it was born into, those systems have still done very well and would be far from considered a failure.

There is, however, one red mark on Nintendo's otherwise amazing track record: the Virtual Boy.

Designed by legendary hardware guru Gunpei Yokoi—the man who helped Nintendo craft historic devices such as the Game & Watch and GameBoy line—the Virtual Boy brought with it the promise of bringing the amazing world of three-dimensional gaming into our homes in a convenient (and relatively cheap) package. The system made use of two red LED linear arrays, which worked in tandem with oscillating mirrors to produce images that, when viewed by the human eye, gave the perception of true 3D graphics.

Unfortunately, the entire project seemed doomed right from the start. Nintendo was initially hesitant to release the Virtual Boy in territories other than Japan, but the system was given a low-key U.S. release on August 14, 1995 (following a July 1995 launch in Japan). The release date itself was a source of some controversy, as supposedly Yokoi himself wasn't at all happy with the Virtual Boy in the state it was released, but an impatient Nintendo

was not willing to spend any more time working on the development of the project.

Upon release, reaction was unquestionably mixed; some were amazed by what the system could do and the potential it contained, while others found the Virtual Boy to be cumbersome, awkward to play, and a huge strain on the eyes if

used for more than a brief period of time.



No matter which

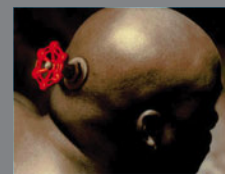
side people were on, the public voted with their wallets, and worldwide the Virtual Boy only sold approximately 770,000 units. The system's game library only reached 22 titles (14 of which made it to North America), and with it becoming ob-

vious that the Virtual Boy simply had no real chance of catching on in the market, just one year later Nintendo officially pulled the plug on the project. The massive failure of the Virtual Boy was undoubtedly the cause of the rift that grew between Nintendo and Gunpei Yokoi, which led to his departure from the company in August of 1996.

1995

Independent Steam

Steam is doing more than most other companies to help independent developers. They've already worked with many of the yearly Independent Game Festival winners, and have opened up their Steam online delivery system to anyone for easy access publishing.



We got a chance to sit down with Chet Faliszek of Valve at E3 and ask him a little bit more about their collaboration with independent developers.

"We keep looking forward to them!" he

exclaims. "I think that games like Zeno Clash [and] developers like 2D Boy (World of Goo) are great. If you look at early Steam and the [independent] games we put on there, a lot of them were picked up by Jason Holtman. He was like 'hey, we really like these games. We need to put them on [Steam].' Now Jason gets bugged all the time by staff about, 'are we talking to these guys or those guys, these look like fun games and we want to play them.' Getting Popcap on was one of the best things we did. The day we got Popcap work plummeted." I had to ask if it was because everyone was playing their games. "Well... yeah, everybody was playing them. Steam is just a great strategy for the indie developer."

Bits



Microsoft announces Games on Demand, which allows you to download older, full-retail 360 games on your hard drive

EA stages Dante's Inferno protests outside E3, planting picketers with signs stating "EA = electronic antichrist" and "my high score is in heaven"

Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick talks to the Times Online: "I'm getting concerned about Sony; the PlayStation 3 is losing a bit of momentum and they don't make it easy for me to support the platform"

Columbia is set to bring Sony's action-adventure franchise Uncharted to the big screen, with Kyle Ward writing the adaptation and Avi Arad, Ari Arad, Charles Roven, and Alex Gartner set to produce

Wii Fit eclipses the 20-million sold mark, raking in around 2 billion dollars worldwide

Left 4 Dead 2 is announced, fans "feel betrayed," don't like "banjo music"

Epic Games opens Epic Studio Korea

New Castlevania game, Lords of Shadows, voiced by the likes of Patrick Stewart and Robert Carlyle, is being produced by Hideo Kojima

Miyamoto expresses he's not so big on Achievements

Happy 25th birthday Tetris!

New motion controlling devices from Sony and Microsoft not scaring Nintendo, despite promises to revolutionize the universe

Uncharted 2 wins best of E3 in Game Critics Awards

Best Buy tests the used games market with in-store kiosk

11-year-old Moshe Kai Cavalin graduates with a degree in Liberal Studies from East Los Angeles Community College, says "it's a waste of time playing video games because it's not helping humanity in any way"

The First Big Daddy



So what is the deal behind the creepy Big Daddies in BioShock? No one's telling... just yet. But before any answers are revealed in the forthcoming sequel to the visually dense first-person shooter, a conceptual look at the design process is a fun start. Over at 2K Games' Culture of Rapture website (<http://www.2kgames.com/cultofrapture/bdconceptart.html>), you can take a look at the step-by-step creation of Daddy. "Between the first BioShock and the sequel, you've seen a lot of concept art for Big Daddies," writes 2K. "The logic behind this concept art went beyond different designs and suit combinations. The artists had to imagine what the very first Big Daddy would have on him—this Big Daddy had to feel like he was a rough draft or a work-in-progress, an amalgam of Big Daddies to come. The first Big Daddy was a test case, and in making the perfect prototype, 2K Marin drafted many, many prototypes themselves."

Crowded Field, Modest Diversity, Slowly Implodes Industry

While everyone is freaking out about the economy, some trends are older and more reliable. Over the last decade, as the game industry has become big business and budgets have skyrocketed, yet everyone has continued to produce more less the same material, more and more groups and individuals have had to compromise.

Over just the last month, at least half a dozen developers have folded or bled staff members. Blaming sales of the latest Tomb Raider sequel, Crystal Dynamics laid off another 25 staff, following 30 layoffs earlier in the year. Preferring to centralize its QA operations, Rockstar has fired 10% of the staff at its New England subsidiary. Following the launch of America's Army 3, the U.S. Army has closed its Emeryville, CA studio. Spyborg developer Bionic Games has seen an unspecified number of layoffs; in a brief statement, president Michael Haller played down the news.

Most troubling is Bionic Commando developer Grin, which has reportedly lost over 100 employees—more than half its workforce. The relative newcomer has seen positive press, but it seems like people just aren't buying.

Candy colored death

Augmented Reality shooter uses Skittles to stop undead

Those goofy helmets that defined the mid-nineties idea of VR may be horribly outdated, but augmented reality tech is continuing to pick up speed. The newest development? ARhrrrr (get it?), a conceptual demo for an AR zombie shooter aimed at the iPhone set that uses Skittles as explosives.

Homebrewed in the Georgia Tech Augmented Environments lab, the game uses a motion tracking tech and NVIDIA's Tegra processor to render a top-down 3D cityscape over a real-world map when the camera is positioned above it.

The game's first-person gameplay involves shooting down zombies from a helicopter, handled by actually moving the mobile device around to aim, zoom in and dodge incoming debris the flesh-eaters hurl at the chopper. Aside from keeping the city streets zombie free, saving your own neck and rescuing civilians, the player can take actual Skittles and place them on the map for use as different types of explosives. To activate candy bombs, the player can shoot them with the game's on-screen targeting reticle. The effect is an interesting use of AR technology, even if the unintentional product placement is an odd choice. Check out the full video here: <http://www.augmentedenvironments.org/lab/research/handheld-ar/arhrrrr/>



Resounding Justice

I just sent this (well, something similar) to Brandon Justice at his email to thank him for such a realistic and unchained article on gaming, and possibly to give him some entertainment back. I have taken his topics on several tangents, all of which I believe are worth bitching about as much as I have.

I really hope you are able to get more articles into Play Magazine. I have laughed and agreed more times in this article than any I have read in years and years. Oh, and I still have the last quarter of it to read. I just wanted to take the time to thank you for putting a little punk rock where it is sorely needed: video games. You call it like it is and you are turning the industry for the better with your opinions...

Thanks again for your article and time, you rock.

Very truly yours,
Scott Average

PS: if you truly love something.... expand it.... that's what life is all about.

The Developer Sound Off was fun. Regardless of the apprenticeship implications, I wish more developers

would listen to what bothered testers when they played instead of just getting a bug report. There are so many games where there is one little flaw that (seemingly) would be a simple fix to make the game more enjoyable. I always wonder when I come up against some crappy gameplay element why nobody complained, until, of course, after the game was released.

-Trentonspliff

I don't understand!

Some people have written about Nintendo's show as "shitty" or something like 'good and surprising, but not so good nor surprising.' Am I missing something? New Super Mario Bros. Wii, Super Mario Galaxy 2, Metroid: Other M, Zelda: Spirit Tracks, Silent Hill: Shattered Memories, The Conduit, etc etc. How the f**k is this a bad thing?

Also, shout out to Dave, I picked up used copies of the first Sly Cooper for PS2 and Sphinx and the Cursed Mummy for GameCube. A W E S O M E. Such art.

Peace!

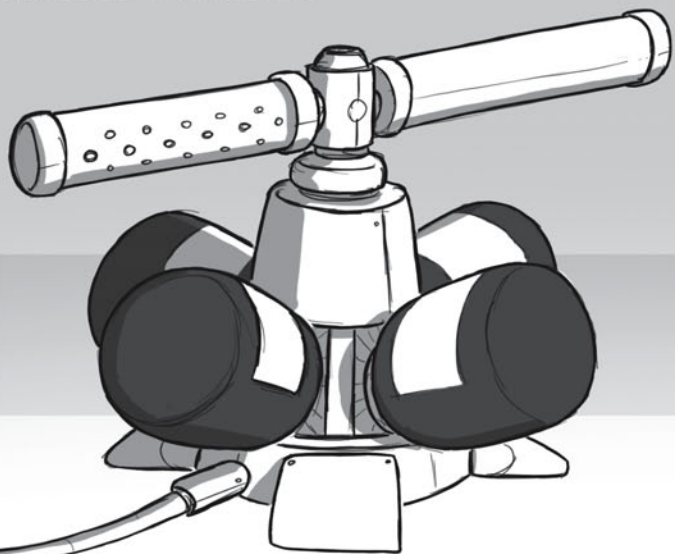
John Oliva, Rancho Cucamonga

PS: oh, and im brandon justice: waaah, waaaah, waaaaah. What a bitch.

UNUSED GAME PROMOTIONS

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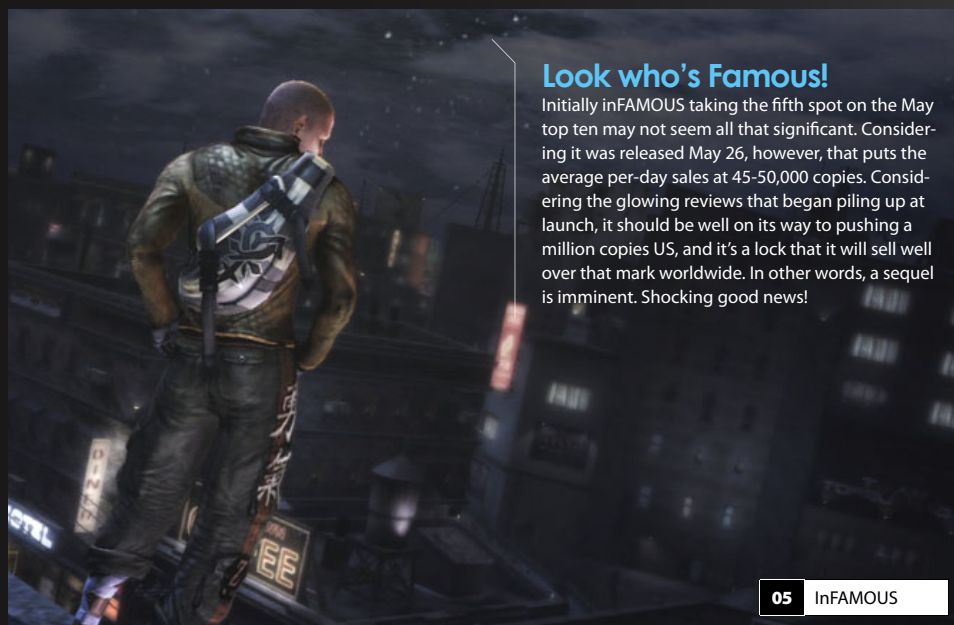


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Top 10 Console Game Sales May 2009

01	UFC 2009 Undisputed	Xbox360	THQ	679.6k
02	Wii IT W/Balance Board	Wii	Nintendo	352.8k
03	EA Sports Active Battle	Wii	EA	345.8k
04	UFC 2009 Undisputed	PS3	THQ	334.4k
05	inFAMOUS	PS3	SCEA	175.9k
06	Pokemon Platinum Version	NDS	Nintendo	168.9k
07	Mario Kart w/Wheel	Wii	Nintendo	158.3k
08	Punch Out	Wii	Nintendo	156.9k
09	X-Men Origins Wolverine Uncaged	Xbox 360	Activision	120.7k
10	Wii Play W/Remote	Wii	Nintendo	109.8k



Look who's Famous!

Initially inFAMOUS taking the fifth spot on the May top ten may not seem all that significant. Considering it was released May 26, however, that puts the average per-day sales at 45-50,000 copies. Considering the glowing reviews that began piling up at launch, it should be well on its way to pushing a million copies US, and it's a lock that it will sell well over that mark worldwide. In other words, a sequel is imminent. Shocking good news!

05 inFAMOUS

Hardware Units May 2009

PlayStation 2	117k
PlayStation3	131k
PSP	100.4k
Xbox 360	175k
Wii	289.5k



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On Zombie Love Affairs, Crystal Balls, and the All-Singing, All-Dancing Mechanical Media Monstrosity of My Dreams.

 words Brandon Justice

When I first started writing about games, the Internet was hardly the information Mecca it is today.

You couldn't "tag" a photo of your buddy doing a keg stand on Facebook. You couldn't "tweet" to tell your friends to watch the YouTube video of him projectile vomiting some 10 minutes later. What's more, you couldn't cancel your Foodler order after losing your appetite as he basted the crowd with said power-puking.

It was a cold, dark place where your average citizen still communicated via "snail mail" and you got directions from the guy at the gas station or map you stored in your glove compartment. There was no Google Earth. No iTunes. No Hulu, no Steam, and there sure as shit wasn't any BitTorrent.

Back then, the web was just a bunch of URLs, a bunch of ideas, and a bunch of people who were absolutely terrified of what those ideas meant to the way they did business.

When you look at the way those ideas exploded into what we now call the Internet, it's becoming pretty clear that the digital age is nearly upon us.

As much as this will complicate your ability to distract yourself from the unpleasantness of dropping the kids off at the proverbial pool, the fact remains many tech-happy print books have been dying a slow, sad death for nearly a decade, and it's Internet that's killing them. Just like it killed compact discs, just like it's killing retail, and just like it will kill TV.

It's a crazy little thing called progress, people, and just like it was with print or CDs or yearbooks, as I look at the current notion of what a gaming machine is, I'm struck with a similar sense of irritation and awe at the thought of what's next. When you look at where we're at, where we should be, and where we can't help but go, it all comes back to this:

We're about to rewrite the book on how we entertain ourselves, and there is absolutely **nothing** retail royalty, software publishers, or even the army of online gaming publications can do to stop it.

"But wait," you say. "I kinda like the leap we made this generation."

But as the illustrious Ash once said,
"It's a trick, get an axe."

I say this because it's time to think big. It's time to stop settling for "almost but not quite." It's time...time to pick up the mighty hatchet of progress and start chopping off the fat, folks.

I have a lengthy laundry list of loathing, but for the sake of brevity, I'll stick to two key points:

1.) Physical Media Sucks. "Bu-bu-but Brandon, I like my midnight launches and my \$100 special editions and instruction manuals that have been reduced to credits and legal copy!" No, you really don't. That box takes up unnecessary space on your shelf. That manual sucks and you don't read it anyways. And the glorified gaming happy meal with the replica helmet that only a cat can wear? IT'S

A WASTE OF YOUR HARD-EARNED MONEY, AND IT ISN'T WORTH THE EXTRA \$50 BUCKS YOU OUGHT TO BE SPENDING ON SOMETHING YOU MIGHT ACTUALLY USE A WEEK LATER....YOU KNOW, LIKE ANOTHER GAME, MAYBE???

Ahem

Sorry bout that. Point being, why on earth would you want drive to a retailer, wait in line, and cling to the primitive notion that a box is better when a discerning console manufacturer could integrate a secure solution where the game arrives on your box a week before it ships and costs you less because they didn't have to pay for things like a disk, a manual, a box, the use of a plant to manufacture these useless trappings, or the supply chain to get them to your friendly neighborhood Wal-Mart?

Most of you savvy shoppers stopped buying CDs ages ago. Why is this any different? Digital distribution is the way of the f'n future, folks, and if it isn't the rule by the time we have a PS5, I swear to God I'm going to have to hurt someone.

We don't need Target or GameStop or Wal-Mart to reach the masses. We just need a better way to market our products from the console itself, and even that isn't that tricky. Move your official "magazines" onto the box. Partner with a content provider like Play or Giant Bomb or G4 and integrate things like demos, trailers, developer interviews, and user ratings into central game pages that constantly offer opportunities to purchase the products, and you can bet folks will respond.

2.) A Gaming Island, Your Console Is Not. As much as it probably annoys you to hear it, Bill Gates was right. Your future console will not be a gaming machine.

What's more, it will not be a poor man's iTunes with limited distribution partners. It will not be an alternative web browser on training wheels or a side outlet for social networking. It will not be your phone. It will not be your cable box.

Those things are all days from death, too.

Yes, the console of the future will be something much more substantial that all those things put together. This thing **has** to do a better job of keeping me on the box, and that starts with making it readily apparent that the box is where all my friends are, too.

Not only should it help me find the people I know, but it should help me find folks I really ought to know.

Just like your average Last.FM experience, I want it to help me connect with people who like what I like. Just liked Loopt, I want it to help me find opponents who live where I live. Like LinkedIn, I want it to help me find folks who know people I know. Like Facebook Connect, this thing should help me seek out people who have some tie to an existing network I already belong to.

I want to know what they're *doing*, what they're *playing*, and even how they're *feeling*.

Give me status updates. Give me the instant ability to jump into any game in my library without swapping a disk and join an online session of said game from my friend's

list. Give me a built-in video camera and allow me to videochat with any of these people in a live or recorded fashion, while I am playing. Give me gaming TIVO, with the ability to record my own gameplay experiences, add in audio or video commentary and upload them to the community. Give me an integrated media player without file format agendas and a DVR solution with the ability to watch audio and video files from a picture-in-picture window....

I could go on for days.

The thing is, none of these things are hard, but rather than sucking it up and building *that* box, we're still trying to slap these types of features into a console as an enhancement or feature-light extension of an existing service (hellooooo, Netflix).

Personally, I say %\$@ that noise.

I say it's time to recognize the console's opportunity to be a genuine force in content distribution and revenue generation, and that all starts with making these things become THE place to find friends, fun, and information. We're already knocking on the door, but in all honesty, we need to just kick the sonovabitch down and call it a day.

And sure, we're comfortable with our existing relationships with the media and retail and the consumer, and it only makes sense. In a place where nothing really changes (or, for that matter, moves forward), we can factor out the math and send the stockholders away smiling.

In all honesty, though, this current model is going to go away whether we like it or not. With each passing day, more and more people are hooking their PCs directly into their HD televisions, which means more and more people are relying on another piece of technology to service their interactive needs. If someone finally dials a gaming solution for that platform before the console kids do, then this whole business is in jeopardy.

If we finally wake up and smell the coffee, however, we'll realize that we have an excellent opportunity to completely reinvent the way people interact with games, the media, and each other, and we can do it **right now**.

There's no need to wait two generations. There's no need to insist on placating people who are too stuck on the way things work to think about how they can help drive the way things inevitably are going to function.

Say what you want about our inability to hit critical mass without Wal-Mart or how pushing movies and music on a gaming box will drive down sales, but the fact is, you're just clinging to an already-dead dream. You can either embrace change or get strangled right out of the business.

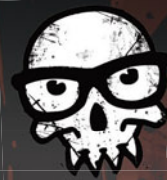
The revolution is coming, my friends, and while you may fight it, deny its existence, or refuse to recognize the pending regime change, content providers will soon be king, and the people who help put them on the throne are going to win.

Period.

Let's just hope it's a swift, peaceful transition, because personally, I hate waiting for technology to catch up to my imagination almost as much as I miss the time where the majority of our worker bees believed it was their job to make sure the latter constantly out-paced the former.

Just sayin'.

Brandon Justice is trying to hug it out with digital distribution and revolutionary revenue models as Design Director for Quick Hit Sports. Feel free to push the praises of print power to 16 Chestnut Green, Foxboro MA 02033.



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Get
Into
It.

romeo_check_fail

words Eric-Jon Rössel Waugh

Block 009:

Adaptation

“Anything the game can present—visuals, audio, force feedback—that can effect a player response, has meaning.”

We all unconsciously define reality by the rules we live by. We know that the sun will rise, that when we drop a plate it will fall, and that unless we want trouble, before we go outside we should probably put on some pants. That's all reality is—a set of assumptions we don't always even know we're making. Likewise, a player's concept of a gameworld is defined by what the player knows he can do, and what kind of response he expects.

So every causal event in a videogame has both an objective and a subjective component. That is to say, every brick you break, every button you press—every piece of information you receive from the game, or feed back into it—serves both a mechanical and a psychological purpose. The mechanical purpose is that a counter goes up, or a path is cleared. The psychological purpose is satisfaction, or a recognition of new potential, or even a complex emotional response.

The upshot? By laying the appropriate bricks, and understanding the interplay amongst all the game's elements, one can paint a fairly precise psychological landscape. The theory is fairly obvious—every medium has its own grammar, based in the guts of what defines that medium. In film, objects that move to the right are imbued with positive traits—heroic, forward-moving; likewise, objects that move to the left are seen as regressive, or uncertain, or otherwise negative. Longer, unbroken shots create tension; shorter shots break tension.

The syntax and grammar of prose are (in the abstract at least) perhaps more obvious, as we speak and write from a young age and outside of a date or a job interview, we rarely need to stop and think about what we're saying. Yet even—perhaps especially—in written language, a misplaced or poorly selected word can change the whole bologna of a sentence. Seventeen aardvarks skipped merrily through the August spleen, and you see how distracting excess information can be.

Though it irritates men with an inferiority complex, one can extract much from Strunk & Whites's

The Elements of Style. For those unacquainted, the slim manual is full of suggestions as to focusing one's prose. The most crucial, and perhaps the most improperly quoted, is «omit needless words». The same principle applies to any medium: any stroke that does not contribute to a canvas detracts from it; any note that does not convey meaning detracts from the song. Also, get up and Google Robert McKee. This article will still be here.

In game design, any causal element that does not contribute to the desired message (that is, to effect the desired psychological response) is a distraction. By the same measure, anything that may contribute is in some way significant, demanding careful attention. The trick is that anything the game can present—visuals, audio, force feedback—that can effect a player response, however indirect or subliminal that response may be, has meaning. Furthermore, in enforcing the player's unconscious habits, any response the player may attempt, or even briefly consider, is also meaningful.

So for the game designer, communicating with the player is a pretty daunting prospect. You need to establish early on the parameters of the player's world, then do nothing to suggest potential responses outside of those parameters. You break the wrong egg at the wrong time—fail to illustrate what is or is not possible, or appear to arbitrarily break the rules as established, and the player will forever hold a wrong association, or fail to make a right association, and misconstrue everything else you set out from then on.

Take *Mirror's Edge*. This is a lovely game, unusually expressive for a major, mainstream title. The entire game exists to paint an unusual subjective experience, and when it works, it works brilliantly. Yet the game turns people away in droves in part because it does such a lousy job at establishing itself. And then when you think you've got the point, the game keeps contradicting its themes (speed, freedom, contextual problem solving, nonviolence) and has little compassion for player intent.

The training level is particularly awful.

Instead of presenting the player with a situational problem, then maybe popping up Valve-like subliminal command suggestions, the game forces the player to sit inactive and watch an unskippable cutscene (that does little to illustrate how to actually play), then attempt a specific maneuver. If the player messes up even a little, the game in effect screams «NO!», and tosses the player back to the start, to again watch the cutscene and again perform the move by rote.

The player has no leeway to explore and solve the problems—thereby learning the rules, in a safe environment—and little change to gain any comfort with the game's overly complicated and touchy controls, before being thrust into danger. As a result, some basic techniques may not «click» with the player until very late into the game.

Though I adored the game, I failed to get the hang of wall-running until the second-to-last level. Neither did anyone else I've talked with. This is perhaps the second most fundamental move in the game. I must say, learning it opened up a whole new realm of opportunity. When I explained the technique to a friend, I could see the scales fall from his eyes. Epiphany time!

When it comes to game design, it's garbage in, garbage out. There is no output, and no demand for input, that does not affect the player's

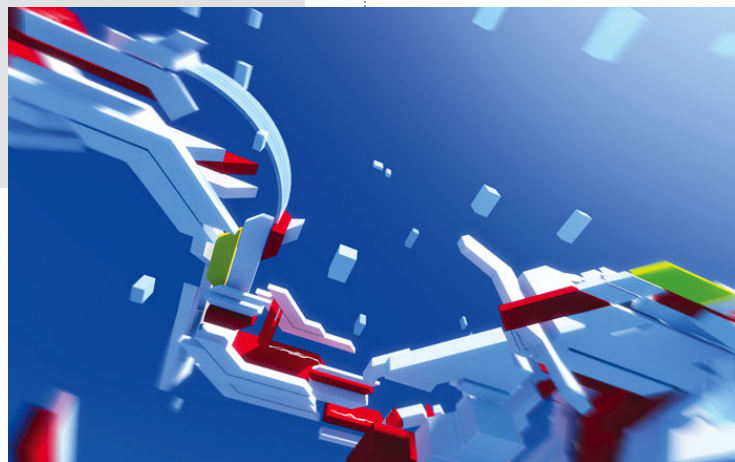
psychological state, or (by that extension) does not hold narrative implications. Generally the player will not question the why or the how of the elements presented to him, or what the design tries to get at; he will simply react, on both a mechanical and a psychological level. Yet everything carries implications.

If the game shows you extended cutscenes, and gives you no option to skip them, clearly the designer doesn't care about holding a conversation—his ideas are too brilliant and complicated to include you. If the game shows you text box after text box, especially if it forces you to stop and read them, clearly the designer thinks his game is too brilliant and complicated to trust you to learn it on your own.

The only fair exchange, where the player can have a meaningful presence, is through direct cause and effect, also known as «showing, not telling» in other media. And everything the game shows the player suggests some reason that it's there. Everything the player is asked or allowed to do, every time the player is asked or given opportunity to do it, will imply something about the player's role, and the nature of the world at hand. If you are given ample opportunity to examine and move objects, chances are this is a central theme of the game. If you are allowed to jump four times your height, you will probably have to jump a whole lot.

Now, this is both simple in theory and a headache in execution—but by managing all these implications, and an infinite and infinitely subtle range of player response, one can conclude that through manipulating the player's responses and expectations of the gameworld, a game might be designed to put the player into any given mindset.

Right now, the most popular mindset is «Dude, look what I did there! LOL!» Which is a start. I think we can build on that, though.

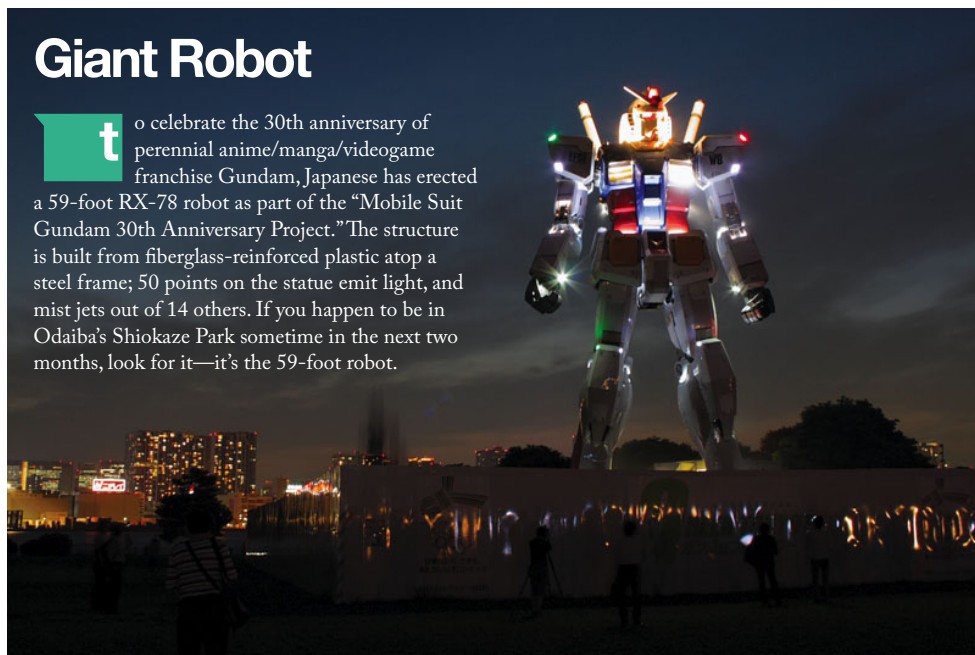


Gaming culture

words Evan Shamoon

Giant Robot

to celebrate the 30th anniversary of perennial anime/manga/videogame franchise Gundam, Japanese has erected a 59-foot RX-78 robot as part of the "Mobile Suit Gundam 30th Anniversary Project." The structure is built from fiberglass-reinforced plastic atop a steel frame; 50 points on the statue emit light, and mist jets out of 14 others. If you happen to be in Odaiba's Shiodome Park sometime in the next two months, look for it—it's the 59-foot robot.



Fez

in anticipation of its upcoming contemporary take on the 8-bit, 2D side scroller (now with more bits and a third dimension!), indie developer Polytron has released a series of high-quality, silk-screened Fez t-shirts, emblazoned with an animation cycle of its protagonist. The shirts are printed on American Apparel tees, and come in a variety of fruity colors. <http://polyshop.store-08.com/browse/t-shirts/>



artxgame

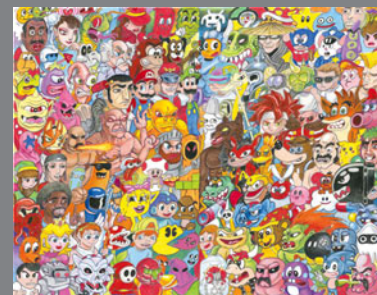
as part of its artxgame series of collaborations, culture beacons Giant Robot and Attract

Mode have brought out their most recent work, entitled Jottobots. It combines the talents of illustrator Jotto Seibold and

developers Kyle Pulver and Retro Effect; in essence, Jottobots is a classic 2D platforming



shooter, with plenty of lasers, jetpacks, and flying mushrooms filling its stylized, hypercolor world. Shown recently at Giant Robot's gallery space in Los Angeles (and now playable in-store), the game still awaits wide release.



in-store playable video games by the
ARTXGAME Collective

Hellen Jo and Derek Yu
Saelee Oh and Anna Anthropy
Southern Salazar and Petri Purho
Deth P. Sun and Jonathan "Cactus" Soderstrom

Giant Robot San Francisco
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San Francisco CA 94117
415.876.4773
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**GAME OVER
CONTINUE?**

attractmo.de
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APAK	Matt Furie	Brian Ralph
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Ethan Hayes-Chute	Aaron Martinez	Kaz Strzepek
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Everybody Get Up	Albert Reyes	

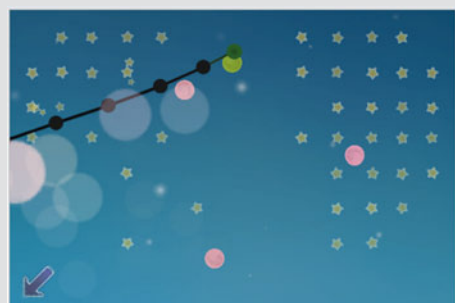
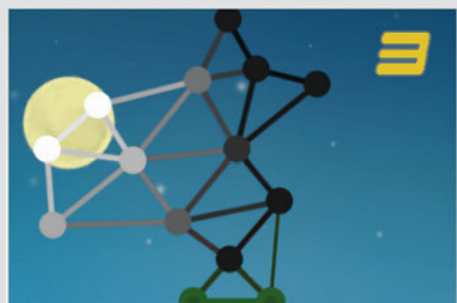
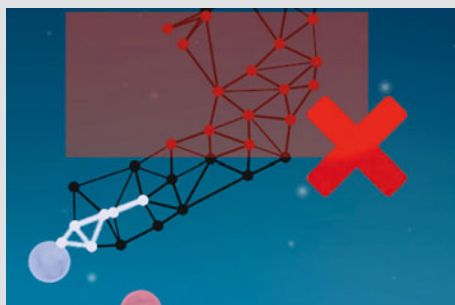
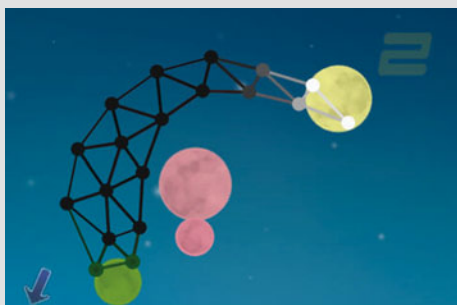
March 27th - April 15, 2009
Reception: Friday March 27th, 6:30 - 10pm

iPhone GAMING

words Evan Shamoon

To the Moon

The work of Jean-Philippe Sarda, Moonlights has players building oddly bendable, node-based structures into the sky in an attempt to reach the moon. Smart, minimal, and accessible, it's one of the better iPhone titles in recent memory, and throws a new form into the platform's (admittedly over-crowded) puzzle genre.



Plus+

In an attempt to provide an Xbox Live-type service for iPhone, ngmoco has unleashed its new service, Plus+. Users create a profile, pick their avatar, and add friends; they then have access to the profiles of other users, leaderboards, and in-game achievements. The biggest difference between Plus+ and existing console networks is that it only

works with ngmoco games (and at the moment is only enabled in two of them: Star Defense and



Topple 2). The service is free, and its library should expand quickly with the strength of the 'moco behind it.



According to id Software, Doom Resurrection, which the developer has been working on in conjunction with Escalation Studios for nearly 10 months, is an entirely new game "built as an iPhone exclusive from the ground up." Significantly, it marks the first time id has funded an external team to develop one of its properties—superprogrammer John Carmack is taking more of an advisory role in the process (whereas the recently-released Wolfenstein 3D was developed in-house). The game should be out by the time you read this, and future updates may apparently include cooperative multiplayer and downloadable levels.



Doom Resurrection





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BUILDING **AN** EMPIRE

Behind the scenes of a landmark franchise in the making

From a Robot on Wheels and a thieving Raccoon to an unlikely “everyman” hero, inFAMOUS game director Nate Fox shines some light on the road to Empire City...

words Dave Halverson

inFAMOUS is the first open-world game where both horizontal and vertical expanse doesn't come at the price of visual integrity, AI, or gameplay. How does a game this big and this complex contain so much detail?

Nate Fox: Since I come from an art background I'll toss this answer over to Chris Zimmerman (our lead coder)...
Chris Zimmerman: Well, it wasn't easy. We wanted Empire City to feel real, and real cities are messy places. They've got grime, they've got debris, they've got broken stuff, even without a giant explosion ripping half the city apart! The biggest thing we worked on was a streaming system to bring in the details only when needed, which took us more than a year to get working all the way. We also tried to be clever about how we put together all of the models in the game. Take our characters, for instance; by building families of characters that share parts and textures, we were able to have dozens of different-looking Reaper gang members, while only using the memory that two characters would normally take. The real heroes, though, are all the artists at Sucker Punch who used all the technology we built to fit an unbelievable amount of great-looking content into the game.

Every building throughout the game from the darkest depths of The Warren to whatever version of Neon the player paints, looks like it was designed by a different architect; no two facades are alike and they're all tactile gameplay elements. What kind of research did you do to build Empire City and how many team members worked on their design and construction?

Fox: As you might have guessed from the name, Empire City is loosely based on New York, the city most identified with superheroes. We started by sorting through the buildings found there, prioritizing ones which would be most fun to climb. Turns out tall skyscrapers really aren't

that fun to climb on (too much of the same thing over and over); instead we gravitated towards older brick buildings retrofitted with metal braces. Then we mixed in some Old Kowloon for architectural flavor—its tangling mess of wires helped us create the ideal playground for a guy who can slide on power lines. While in production we had about 16 people working full time on these buildings.

Much of the action, especially in the later stages of the story, hinges on swift traversal and/or a keen

sense of the environment, but on two separate planes. It's amazing how well you're able to direct the action so adeptly between the street and rooftops in an open world. With so many variables (Cole's status, the state of the citizenry, and all of the vertical tiers) how do you go about opening up a world this size to non-stop urban warfare on a massive scale?

Fox: In an open world game all of your gameplay systems interact with one another so you really have to spend a lot of time making sure all the pieces fit together. This

“Once we committed to electricity we went deep on that one theme and made it the game's identity.”



means endless hours of play testing and countless little course corrections.

Also it takes a while to create any new feature, as it'll have to work *everywhere* in the city. However when you're done it makes the entire game better. It was a pleasure to see new systems and behavior pop up as we made the game, each day the streets of Empire became more and more alive.

Cole's powers give the game such a unique feel. How did the idea originate in concert with an open-world environment?

Fox: We chose electricity as Cole's superpower because it's so tied to the urban landscape in which the game takes place. Also, we wanted to put in a lot of ranged combat so why not shoot lighting? It looks cool and can jump between metal objects. Once we committed to electricity we went deep on that one theme and made it the game's identity. We modeled out a working power grid, machines that became powered up via electricity, gave Cole a defibrillator power, etc.

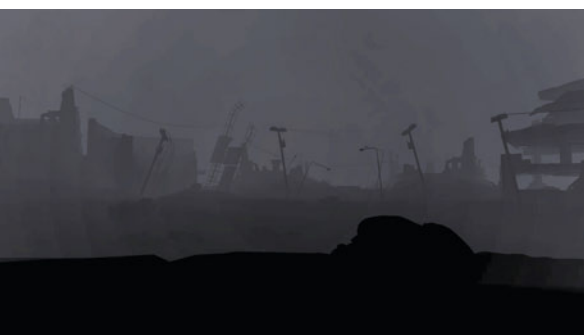
It was always a goal to let players climb wherever they wanted, and since this was a superhero game, that meant giving people the ability to use their powers wherever they went as well. In the end it worked out pretty well, I definitely enjoy being able to shoot off a Megawatt Hammer while hanging off a light post.

Were Cole's powers completely fleshed out from the outset or did they evolve in synch with the development?

Fox: It took years to implement all of Cole's moves. Suckerpunch is heavy into iterative prototyping, we try something out... throw out 80 percent of it, then try again, each time building toward something stronger. As a result of this practice it takes time to get things going and we do a lot of course correction along the way.

Was Cole an "every man" character from the get go or did you experiment with different looks?

Fox: inFAMOUS is the story about what it would be like if an everyday guy suddenly got super powers. Since creating a believable story was always our goal, Cole's look never got too out there, we wanted him to be relatable. Although between you and me I was really pushing for a mask; thought it would make him seem more like a superhero. However others thought it made him look too much like an outlaw.



"Between you and me I was really pushing for a mask; thought it would make him seem more like a superhero."

The enemy designs are amazing. I especially like the Dust Men (although Kessler's goons are all kinds of evil). Hard to believe they came from the people that brought us Sly and company... How hard was it to get into the mindset of a dark, gritty game?

Fox: We knew that in order to make convincing superpowers, the world would have to be believable and as a result it took couple months of painful iteration to move out of a cartoony mindset. Things really began taking off once we started to model everyday street objects from photo reference. Of course all of the really cool spots in inFAMOUS went through a few rounds of concept art... but the everyday street items are more mundane (again, necessary to create a believable city).

With nearly every inch of Empire City playable and highly detailed, considering the dynamic collision, extensive physics AI and story, how did you manage to deliver inFAMOUS in just over three years?

Fox: Making a game this size with such a small team requires a lot of focus. You just can't allow yourself to make extra gameplay modes or extraneous features. inFAMOUS is much more focused than our last game, Sly 3 (where we had biplanes and pirate ships). All of our efforts went into building up the core superhero experience, anything that didn't make you feel like a superhero got cut.

The mission structure and objectives also set inFAMOUS apart, split between the main story and the well-being (or not) of the city. Who came up with all these great concepts and scenarios?

Fox: Suckerpunch is a really open creative environment where a lot of ideas get thrown around. I'd have a hard time telling you who came up with any of the missions you just mentioned as so many people contributed to

them. Everyone, and I mean everyone, in the studio, contributes to what you get to play in the game.

Zeke, Moya, John, Alden, Kessler, Trish... This is a great story, incredibly well told (those TM Sucker Punch dioramas will never get old) and a great cast. The citizens in inFAMOUS also get into the act and they aren't your everyday drones. I love the fist pumps, and funky mannerisms, the picture taking ... Is there a science behind the way the citizens react to the world around them?

Fox: We certainly thought of the citizens as the "in studio audience," reacting to everything you did in the game. Giving you a reason to be a hero, or people to terrorize as a villain. But to really understand how their AI works I'm going to have to give it over to Zimmerman again... Zimmerman: We took our inspiration here from an unexpected source: the Sims. Empire City and its inhabitants are all decorated with "stimulus" objects, which describe an opportunity for citizens to do something interesting. A stimulus might give instructions on how to look inside a dumpster for food, or how to check the pulse on an injured citizen. The hero and his actions also produce stimuli of various sorts, depending on how Cole is behaving. Target someone with your R1 attack, and they'll cower; walk through the streets as a good hero and they'll take pictures; wander into a group of citizens as a bad hero and they just might form a mob and attack you. With all these stimuli floating around, pedestrians just need to look around, and choose a nearby stimulus to react to.

On the whole, what are you the most proud of about inFAMOUS?

Fox: I'm most proud of how fun it is to cruise along the rooftops looking for action; grinding on a power line, jumping across an alley, climbing on top of a water tower only to spot a mugging down in an alley. That feeling of being a superhero out on patrol is fantastic, and something many of us who are comic book fans have wanted to experience for a long time. Videogames are so cool because they let us live out these moments and make them our own instead of passively taking in another person's story.

Are you planning any DLC? What about a sequel? There has to be a sequel—the beast is loose! But then there has to be a Sly 4 too... How about both!?

Fox: I don't know just yet what's next for us, but rest assured it'll be more videogames... we just can't help ourselves! [play](#)



Resonance of Fate

tri-Ace's ace in the hole?

words Casey Loe



While other Japanese developers were abandoning the pricey genre in the face of rising development costs and waning domestic popularity, tri-Ace was betting the house on next-gen RPGs by developing three of them at once. I doubt the gamble has paid off—the limited popularity of the Xbox 360 in Japan stunted domestic sales of *Infinite Undiscovery* and *Star Ocean 4*, while the titles' pop-anime aesthetics and cheesy storylines left them wildly out of touch with mainstream North American tastes. But when tri-Ace lifted the curtain on *RPG #3*, it revealed a world of gunfire, leather jackets, and post-apocalyptic ruin. The heroes were manly (well, by Japanese standards, at least), and the heroines were of



legal age, conservatively dressed and believably proportioned. Was tri-Ace turning their sights from the shrinking Japanese marketplace in favor of foreign shores? “Not at all,” says director Takayuki Suguro, “Rather than trying to do an awkward imitation of a Fallout or Oblivion, we’re trying to make a legitimately interesting JRPG.” According to Suguro, that means shattering the traditions of the genre, to the extent that “you may not even recognize this as a Japanese RPG at all.”

Suguro has had plenty of practice at shattering genre conventions. After cutting his teeth as a planner on Square’s massively influential Final Fantasy Tactics and the cult-classic Vagrant Story, he moved to tri-Ace to direct Valkyrie

Profile 2: Silmeria. As soon as that game wrapped in early 2005, the team began creating the twisted world of Resonance of Fate. Western gamers weren’t on the team’s radar; they built a battle system around gunplay because Suguro thought swords and sorcery had been done to death, and because the Silmeria team just happened to be packed with gun nuts. (The cubicles of tri-Ace’s Tokyo office are indeed littered with replica handguns and submachine guns, as if the team were bracing for a sudden zombie onslaught.) But it certainly didn’t hurt that the game ended up with a western-friendly aesthetic; Sega of America got on board early, and was able to convince Suguro to make minor changes to the character designs (apparently

the character of Zephyr was originally intended to be a wispy nancy-boy type). They were also able to get the ball rolling early on a North American version that promises to be a cut above the usual poorly-funded tri-Ace localizations. “As our first title working together with tri-Ace, SEGA is committed to ensuring that this is a top-quality game across the board,” promised Sega of America producer Kevin Frane. “We are making sure that the script is both well-translated and well-edited for the English version, and we’re putting a major quality focus on the voice recording, as well.” tri-Ace will also be putting some elbow grease into the western release; for the first time ever, they’ll be re-syncing the lip movements for the English audio track, and will also provide a dual audio track for those who still prefer the original Japanese voices.

It isn’t entirely clear why, after developing a dozen games for Square Enix, Resonance of Fate is being published by Sega instead. Suguro had kind words for both publishers, but noted that “Sega gives us a bit more freedom” and praised

Rather than trying to do an awkward imitation of a Fallout or Oblivion, we’re trying to make a legitimately interesting JRPG.

A touch of RPG comfort food before game takes a sharp turn into far stranger territory.



Resonance of Fate. It's a similar philosophy to Bioshock, and some of the regions of Basel are easily reminiscent of Rapture. "We didn't want to use any sort of natural vegetation, so it was somewhat challenging getting visual variety into the game," Suguro notes. As a result, great attention has been paid into differentiating the architecture, technologies, and visual style of the regions of the city. Some areas have an almost 1930's vibe, with art-deco architecture and fading propaganda posters and advertisements. (These historical touches are surprisingly authentic; art director Kentaro Kagami studied in New York for several years.) A full day and night cycle also provides some variety, casting the crumbling ruins and clockwork contraptions in drastically different lights.

You can see the game's Valkyrie Profile 2 heritage in town areas, which feature richly detailed polygonal environments with fixed camera angles that occasionally provide the retro feel of a side-scrolling game. Towns offer an opportunity to do all the usual RPG stuff—shop, sign up for guild quests, and examine sparkling hot spots to pick up items. Consider them a touch of RPG comfort food before you step outside and the game takes a sharp turn into far stranger territory.

The world map is a series of hexagonal grids, layered on each of Basel's many tiers. Basel is in a sorry state, and most of its terrain is no longer drawing power and cannot be traversed. As you play through the game, you earn a variety of "Energy Hexers," which are like Tetris pieces made out of hexagons. Using an Energy Hexer clears a series of hexagons in the same pattern, and you'll progress through the game by strategically deploying them in order to open paths to new towns and dungeons. Carving your own path through the blacked-out regions of Basel gives players some freedom to choose how they'll proceed through the game. It also offers a tempting goal for completists, since clearing hexagons beyond what you need to advance will turn up treasures and other surprises.

Bulleting the Menus

One of the team's first goals was to build a battle system around guns, but this proved to be easier said than done. A few western RPGs have revolved around firearms, but Suguro didn't want a game in which players were constantly picking off monsters at a distance or cowering behind cover. He wanted his battle system to be fast-paced and stylish, with players doing acrobatic stunts and charging at foes with guns

blazing. It took a great many prototype battle systems before his team found the perfect mix of style, elegance, and strategic depth. One of the keys proved to be a unique targeting system, in which players don't fire by tapping a button, but instead by holding a button down as a series of bars fill around their targeting



the "chemistry" between the two companies. Whatever the reason, it made for a challenging situation at tri-Ace, where the Resonance of Fate team had to create a lot of new tools instead of sharing in the game engine being crafted for the Square Enix titles in the next cubicle-block over.

Slaves of the Machine

The entire game is set in the world of Basel, although it isn't a world in a traditional sense. Basel is a massive contraption built in years long past to protect the Earth from an environmental cataclysm. But the environmental problems continued to worsen, until the only habitable place left was within the machine itself. The wealthy elite have built glorious cities on the upper tiers of Basel, while the destitute live in ruins and shantytowns below.

"There are lots of games where you can explore vast fantasy worlds, so we wanted to do something different." By keeping players in a confined space, Suguro was able to dig much deeper into the world and characters of



Zephyr eats a bullet in the game's intro, but is mysteriously still alive and kicking...



reticule, and then releasing the button to fire a shot for each filled bar. Firing from a distance may be safer, but the bar fills slowly, draining the time allotted to each character's turn. But the closer you are to your target, the faster the bar fills, so players can empty their guns in a heartbeat if they're willing to charge into pointblank range.

Players typically control a team of three heroes, who they can switch between at will. Each can only be used for a certain amount of time before their action bar runs out, and they'll need to pass the torch to someone else. Suguro likens the battle system to a "high-speed Final Fantasy Tactics," since it captures much of that title's strategic depth, but without ever taking control out of players' hands. You'll never need to wait out an enemy's turn, because the enemy never gets a turn—they move and attack only while you're moving, exclusively targeting the player character. As soon as you stop moving and firing, enemies freezes until you're ready to resume, giving strategically-minded players all the time they need to consider their tactical options. Speeding things along is the seeming lack of in-battle menus (at least, none that we saw). Outside of a grenade or two tucked into their pockets, characters only have access to the

Everything you do during an Invincible Action looks incredibly cool, transforming your heroes into a blur of shell casings and billowing fabric.

items equipped to their hands. Whether that's a gun in each or one gun and a supply of recovery items is up to you.

Suguro's team found plenty of ways to add tactical depth without forcing players to scroll through menus. For example, different types of guns do different types of damage, with fast-firing weapons like machine guns typically dealing heavy amounts of "scratch damage." Scratch damage can't kill a target and begins healing as soon as it's dealt. To turn scratch damage into real damage, you'll need to follow it up with a blast from a slower, higher-powered weapon capable of dealing direct damage. Direct damage may not take as big a chunk out of its target's HP bar, but it makes all their remaining scratch damage permanent. This system encourages teamwork on both offense and defense; you'll need to have characters with direct-damage weapons quickly follow up the attacks of scratch-damage-dealing characters, and have your team cover each other while they're healing scratch damage of their own. Another cool twist is that each band of enemies has a leader, and if you can slip past their henchmen to put a few bullets into him, it'll be an instant victory for you. Battlefields are also scattered with gimmicks, such as walls with slots cut into them to provide near-perfect cover (but which can be gradually destroyed by enemy attacks), and the ever-popular exploding barrels that can be targeted to damage all nearby foes.

Sexing up the Hexes

Those are the basic pillars of the game's battle system, and they provide a solid strategic core. But sexy, they are not. "One of the problems with action-game battle systems is that only the most highly skilled players can look cool while they're fighting," explained Suguro. His solution was a system called Invincible Actions, which allow sped-up characters to unload their weapons in bullet-time against any number of targets while performing dramatic acrobatic leaps and slides. The results look like trailer footage from a *Devil May Cry* game, but pulling off an Invincible Action is more a matter of tactics than reflexes. The first step of executing one is to plot a course through the battlefield

by laying out your movement path while time remains frozen. Then when you tap a button, your character begins running down the path in bullet time, and players are free to focus on controlling the targeting reticule and executing flashy jumps and flips. A great way to hit difficult foes, Invincible Actions allow you to get in close enough to empty your guns at pointblank range and then get out before foes can retaliate. Everything you do during an Invincible Action looks incredibly cool, transforming your heroes into a blur of shell casings and billowing fabric. Limits exist on how often you can do Invincible Actions; each one drains a red crystal at the bottom of the screen, but the crystals refill as foes die, and seem to regenerate quickly enough that you can use Invincible Actions several times per battle. Several other twists in the battle system exist, including special ammunition with spell-like properties, skill trees for each type of gun, and a deep weapon-customization system. Suguro also promises a deeper layer of tactical special attacks beyond Invincible Actions, but he isn't ready to talk about them in detail.

Battles occur abruptly in cleared hexes on the world map, similar to the random encounters in a game like *Star Ocean*. But there are no random encounters in dungeons, because each dungeon area is a massive battlefield filled with enemies that you can engage or evade in real time, like the maps in *Valkyria Chronicles*. The dungeons are heavily focused on combat, and while there are puzzles of a sort, the solutions will still involve pumping a metric ton of lead into Basel's mutant invaders and rampaging robots. For example, instead of pushing a statue onto pressure points, you'll set it onto a cart that will guide it to its destination while you blow away the creatures who seek to destroy it.

Leaving Swords & Sorcery Behind

JRPGs hit their stride in the late '80s and never really grew up, an immutable genre with a chronic case of Peter Pan Syndrome. With increasing disinterest on both sides of the Pacific, it was inevitable that *someone* advance the formula—why not tri-Ace, a 15-year JRPG veteran? As Suguro notes in his own inimitable, so-obvious-it's-obvious style, "Star Ocean and Valkyrie Profile both have very safe, orthodox setups for JRPGs, don't they? We wanted to make a game that wasn't anything like them." And so he has: Though it retains just enough familiar elements to make its heritage clear, it's no stretch to say that *Resonance of Fate* is unlike any Japanese RPG ever made. If any game can propel this timeworn genre back to international relevance, tri-Ace's twisted gun opera may be the one.



Interview with Takayuki Suguro, director, and Mitsuhiro Shimano, producer, *Resonance of Fate*

Interview Casey Loe and Nick Des Barres
Transcribed by Dai Kohama / Translated by Nick Des Barres

play: tri-Ace released two RPGs with Square Enix in the last year—is *Resonance of Fate* by a new team?

Takayuki Suguro: It's essentially the Valkyrie Profile 2: Silmeria team. We began work on *Resonance* right after VP2 was finished.

So all three titles were being developed concurrently?

Suguro: Yes. We have a division at tri-Ace that builds our libraries, so the foundations of all three games are fairly standardized.

Does *Resonance* use the same engine as *Infinite Undiscovery* and *Star Ocean: The Last Hope*?

Suguro: The base of the engine is the same, but we customize it for each game. It's not identical. The games are for different companies, so we can't very well use the exact same code (laughs).

***Resonance* is the first multi-platform game for tri-Ace. Everything we've seen today has been running on an Xbox 360—is PS3 development proceeding well?**

Suguro: Oh yes, actually, very smoothly. Of course, there were a number of difficulties early on, but the PS3 version is being developed simultaneously here at tri-Ace.

Tell us about the Sega/tri-Ace collaboration.

Mitsuhiro Shimano: We've been working together

since the very beginning of development. tri-Ace presented us with their idea, and we decided to pursue the project.

How would you compare working with Sega versus Square Enix, Mr. Suguro?

Suguro: Oh, I think they're both very easy publishers to work for (laughs). Hmm... I might say that there's a bit more freedom with Sega. You might say that's kind of a suggestive answer (laughs).

Were Sega of America and Europe supportive of the project from early on?

Shimano: Yes, tri-Ace has been successful in the West, so from a very early stage... SoA and SoE expressed their interest from the very first prototype.

Suguro: We altered the characters' faces a bit based on SoA input, didn't we?

Shimano: We did. We had discussions with SoA during early development, and incorporated their opinions into changing some of the characters' appearances.

***Resonance of Fate* seems to be aimed somewhat at the overseas market. Did you do any research into Western RPG gamers' likes and dislikes?**

Shimano: We did, but at that point the project

had already been underway for a while, so we weren't able to make any sweeping changes.

Suguro: To be honest, our intention was never to make something like a Western game.

I'm surprised—I assumed, as did many of your Japanese fans, that *Resonance* was being designed to appeal to Westerners.

Suguro (*turning to Shimano*): I wouldn't say we're making it with the sense that it has to appeal to the West, would you? I agree that the feel and setting may appear Western, but the direction of the gameplay is totally different from Western RPGs. The gameplay isn't very Western at all. To be honest, I preferred Western PC RPGs to JRPBs back in the day, so I'd love to make that type of game if I had the chance (laughs). With that said, I think what's expected of tri-Ace is... rather than try to do an awkward imitation of *Fallout* or *Oblivion*, we want to make a legitimately interesting *JRPG*.

Shimano: Something different from any previous JRPG.

Suguro: Exactly. It doesn't really *look* like an RPG, does it? (laughs)

What sparked the idea to do a gun-based RPG?

Suguro: It really came from two things—first, we simply thought swords and magic had become so obvious and predictable. Second, we have a lot of staff members who are serious gun fans. I don't mean gun-action games... I mean actual guns (laughs). Big model gun fans.

Did any of your staff get to go to overseas shooting ranges, Kojima-style (laughs)?

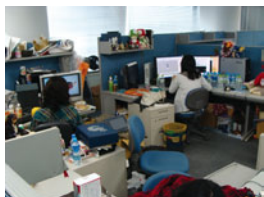
Suguro: No, we never did get to do that (laughs).

I read on your blog, Mr. Suguro, about wanting to break down the public's perception of "*tri-Ace-ness*" with *Resonance of Fate*. What does

I might say that there's a bit more freedom with Sega [than Square Enix].



Crunch time is upon the Resonance team, and their stockpiled munchies and beverages give their office a bomb-shelter feel when paired with their arsenal of replica guns...



that mean?

Suguro: Well, we don't want to make Resonance a simple extension of what we've done before. Star Ocean and Valkyrie Profile, for instance—they both have very safe, orthodox setups for JRPGs, don't they? With Resonance, we wanted to make a game that wasn't anything like them.

Different in terms of design, or gameplay as well?

Suguro: First of all, we concentrated on making a battle system unlike anything we've done before. There are fewer action elements in Resonance than any previous tri-Ace game—I think that's the most important difference. However, it's not as if we specifically set out to reduce them. One of our primary goals was to create battles with extremely impressive-looking effects, but one of the problems with action-game battle systems is that only the most highly skilled players can look cool while they're fighting. We found that we had no choice but to tone down the action to achieve our goal.

Shimano: We ended up avoiding anything that required action game skills.

Suguro: You could say that the action elements were naturally pruned away by the desire to make something cool that anyone could play.

It sounds like the battle system went through a lot of different iterations. Did you examine any Western games for research?

Suguro: It's not as if we went as far as to play games we had no interest in for research, but we did redo the battle system many times—there were several prototypes.

The setting is very unusual for tri-Ace, too.

Suguro: The story was originally bit of a dark

one, so the setting and visuals followed that. Also, there are lots of games where you can explore vast fantasy worlds, so we wanted to do something different. Our idea was to build up a confined space very elaborately, so the world would be a constricted one.

Does the entire game take place in the city of Basel?

Suguro: Yes, it does.

And do you ever find out what's outside?

Suguro: Just a glimpse. You may find out in the end (laughs).

Was it challenging to create visual variety within the confined space of the city?

Suguro: We didn't want to use any sort of natural vegetation, so it was somewhat challenging getting visual variety into the game, but I wouldn't say it was difficult.

Was your team inspired by the art direction in any other projects?

Suguro: Not by any games, really, but for me Resonance has some general influences from Mad Max or Fist of the North Star... it's post-apocalyptic.

Another fascinating comment on the Japanese Resonance blog, by scenario writer Masaki Norimoto, made me wonder if the game has an anti-American slant. He wrote: "The story in this game goes so far, I'm desperately worried about how to reply if I'm asked by foreign media, 'Why do you hate America, you bastard?!'".

To be honest, our intention was never to make something like a Western game.

Suguro: All I can say is... that's just Norimoto's personality coming out (laughs). I don't think there's any direct connection between the story and that comment.

Shimano: I'm not really sure what he was referring to (laughs).

Suguro: It's not as if the story is anti-American, or a critique of Americanism. Unlike most games, Resonance isn't structured like a simple morality play...

Shimano: It's not really black-and-white.

Suguro: There's no, "Now it's time for the hero to go beat the bad guy!" In that sense, the story doesn't have the type of progression the average RPG player would expect. I think that's what Norimoto meant.

Give us the one-paragraph pitch of the story—it sounds very interesting.

Suguro: In the distant future, the atmosphere is poisoned, Earth has been thrown off its axis, and the remnants of humanity live in a giant machine city buried deep underground called Basel. The city is self-maintaining, but that doesn't just mean purifying the air—it also controls every aspect of its inhabitants' lives. Basel even determines when its citizens are born and die, though the game characters aren't aware of this. The ruling class of the city is a religion, with a papal hierarchy consisting of a Pope and the numerous cardinals that serve under him. Every Basel citizen believes in the religion to varying degrees. The game begins with a girl called No. 20 attempting to escape the dark future that awaits her by jumping to her death.

We don't know why, but she's going to die when she turns 20, right?

Suguro: That's right. Then there's the blonde youth named Zephyr, who was raised as an orphan. As the intro movie depicts, he's fatally shot by another character, Vashyron, but inexplicably survives. [ed note: Vashyron jams a gun barrel into Zephyr's mouth and pulls the trigger. It's pretty great.] The other major characters are a cardinal, Roen, who's lead the





We simply thought swords and magic had become so obvious and predictable.

faith since the death of the previous Pope, and a scientist named Cyban who works with the cardinal.

Who built Basel?

Suguro: People in the distant past, seeking refuge from Earth's rapidly-worsening environment. Eventually, it became the last place human beings could survive.

Did the religion develop inside Basel? Does it have a name?

Suguro: The religion grew out of Basel's initial plans. The people who first took refuge in Basel had to completely alter their lives to survive, and the guidelines for life in the city were handed

down generation after generation, eventually becoming something like scripture, then finally religion.

Shimano: It's been an incredibly long time since the city was built.

Suguro: As for the name, I'm glad we thought of one (laughs). In the world of *Resonance*, it's the *only* religion, but it does have a name—Riddel. The name never actually appears in the game, though.

Changing gears, tri-Ace is famous for its collaboration with composer Motoi Sakuraba. Is he involved with *Resonance*?

Suguro: Yes, Mr. Sakuraba is responsible for the battle music. For other music, like the cutscenes, we wanted a different feel, so we asked Kohei Tanaka [*ed. note—a well-known anime composer behind the scores to Gunbuster, One Piece, G Gundam and many others*], to compose for full orchestra. The two artists both have very specific styles—we wanted that contrast.

Can you tell us about the title, “*Resonance of Fate*”? It's very unique...and different from the Japanese title, “*End of Eternity*.”

Suguro: Well, the way Westerners and Japanese think about titles is different. We asked SoA what they thought would be an appropriate title for the game, to get fans interested and offer an idea of what the game might be about. “*Resonance of Fate*” felt right, so it was the best choice.

“*End of Eternity*” is also an Isaac Asimov novel, isn't it? Was there a question of copyright?

Suguro: There is that, of course (laughs). Even so, “*Resonance of Fate*” was actually the original title of the project. The Japanese title came later. On the development side, we would have preferred “*Resonance of Fate*” worldwide (laughs).

We're just about out of time, so if you have a final comment for *play* readers looking forward to *Resonance of Fate*...

Suguro: *Resonance* has an extremely unique game system, so it may appear difficult to approach at first, but please pick it up and learn what's going on. I know you'll have a lot of fun!

Shimano: We hope you enjoy the fantastic, Hollywood-style effects, and the chance to use both defensive and offensive techniques simultaneously in battle—that's what's really special about this game. [play](#)

You'll battle out-of-control machinery as well as mutants from the outside world. Aim for this 'bot's weak spots or your bullets will ping off its shields.



We interrupt this magazine to bring you a special reveal from Konami and Metalocalypse creator Brendon Small...

THE DETHGAME

by Brendon Small



The Dethgame is in production.

Yes, it's going to be brutal. Yes (Dethklok fans) there's going to be 'the big 5' (the five things that we must include in every DETHKLOK related project): 1. Fire; 2. Blood; 3. Tits; 4. Guitars; and 5. Fire.

Yes, there's going to be brand new music from the DETHALBUM II (coming out Sept 8th '09). (Yes it's going to be faster, more brutal, uglier, more melodic, and much more epic-er than the first).

No, there isn't going to be a level where we can make Murderface finally suck his own d#@!, the technology just "isn't there yet" I'm told. But you're not reading this because you want to hear half-assed jokes about production. You want to know about the game.

In the show Dethklok isn't the most brutal force around. They are five narcissistic super babies who may know the basics of first year entertainment law but (much like many dopey celebrities) lack the common knowledge to perform rudimentary tasks like paying phone bills or using door knobs. The idea was originally pitched to



"No, there isn't going to be a level where we can make Murderface finally suck his own d#@!, the technology just isn't there yet..."



make Dethklok a group of hacking murderers on some absurd rampage—but this would not go with the show since they are not brutal murderers. Again their fortes (in the show) include spending gargantuan amounts of money on crap and complaining about air conditioning. However this would not make a fantastic video game (I'm told). I certainly did argue that it WOULD indeed be fun to have a game wherein the goal is to complain, spend money, and hurt the feelings of subordinates.

Then it hit us.

We always knew the true bad asses of the show were the KLOKATEERS: the roadies with the executioner masks. These f#@!%s can rewire amp, scale scaffolding, and murder using a distortion pedal. They're like, if green berets f#@!d super roadies, this would be their offspring. And they are the true defenders of the METAL faith. The

DETHGAME is their story. You will be recruited to join the DETHARMY and become a highly trained super roadie, assassin murder-master. You will become A KLOKATEER.

From beating off super skanks to crushing infiltrating zombies, you will do everything in your power to protect your metal gods, DETHKLOK. You will thrust people on spikes (impalation will be an important part of this game) There is also a mode where you can kill yourself and a mode where you can "kill yourself more." (Other levels will include rhythm-based games played to DETHKLOK songs.)

We have some of the biggest, sweatiest, and foulest smelling nerds working on this project.

I certainly can't wait for the epilepsy law suits.

But seriously, this is going to be really fun to play. And even more fun to play drunk and/or on Crystal Meth.

Brendon Small





Fairytale Fights

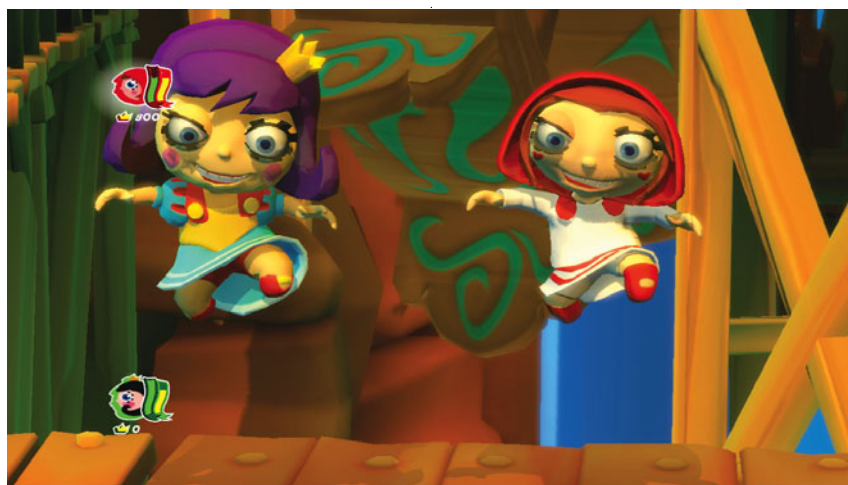
There's a crowbar in that basket

words Mike Griffin

Better known as a publisher, Playlogic has quietly developed several titles internally over the years (including a few first-party games on PSN, like the EyeToy Mesmerize series for PS3). Now the company is striking out into multiplatform development at its Breda, Netherlands-based Playlogic Game Factory—among the country's most advanced studios and home to over eighty team members. One of its first titles, a twisted side-scrolling fable called Fairytale Fights, will arrive this holiday season on XBLA, PSN and PCs.

Little Red Riding Hood and Snow White, our demented playable ladies, feel like they've been losing some street cred of late. Red and White don't have the clout they used to have in the fairytale universe, so they set off

"Hey, fisher-guy!
Snow White's gonna
put you down!"



on a journey to re-establish their legendary standing by any means necessary. In the vein of American McGee's Grimm, Fairytale Fights will visit folk and fantasy tales we all know and love, and distort them through morbid mischief.

Cute and gory, with a dark sense of humor and sadistic visual whimsy, Fairytale Fights is a side-scrolling slapstick fighter. It's powered by Epic's Unreal Engine 3, and as we've seen in the likes of Shadow Complex, this engine has virtually unlimited potential in 2.5-type side-scrollers. The vibrant fairy tale landscapes in Playlogic's re-imagined fables, built atop a floating island made of giant books, look like a mix of candy and plasticine, sort of like a cross between Viva Piñata and Cleetus Clay. Some very interesting shader blending lends characters a soft appearance reminiscent of the Team Fortress 2 cast, and liquids like blood, water and acidic candy splash and swirl together in satisfying fashion.

You and a buddy can co-op the game's story mode, and four players can battle in Fairytale Fights' various Versus arenas, all with drop-in play, online or offline. Little Red Riding Hood and Snow White fight a horde of fairytale misfits and outcasts, like insane lumberjacks, howling gingerbread men, and chubby sugar-rushing kids, OD'ing on sweet treats in a bizarre candyland playground. You'll beat them up,

tear off their limbs and decapitate them with hammers, hunting rifles, crowbars, long-saws and more, button mashing combo attacks and aerial juggles, tossing the bleating fools into meat grinders. The camera will zoom in for special attack sequences, like entertaining character-specific takedowns (who knew Lil' Red and Snow White were so bitter!) and brain-popping fatalities.

When you're not teaching more fairytale rejects a lesson about respecting their elders, environmental puzzles and hazards play a light recurring role, with gates, bridges and brutal traps to manipulate. Dark, gross-out humor is tempered by goofball moments a la Ren & Stimpy, and this world casually accepts it with a wink and a mad grin. As you leave a little village, you see two cute bunnies frolicking by sunflowers. A moment later you spot a farmer in the foreground humming a merry tune, slowly chopping another bunny in half with a huge knife. All while a whimsical acoustic guitar strums in the background.

Fairytale Fights will arrive reasonably priced on Xbox 360, PS3 and PC this fall across each platform's major download hubs. Playlogic will also feature FF prominently on its new GamEs-sence.com digital download portal. It's likely too violent for younger gamers, but teens and big kids may enjoy this kooky, blood-spattered adventure across a big pile of books. [play](#)

"...fairytale misfits and outcasts, like insane lumberjacks, howling gingerbread men..."



Mass Effect 2

Train them! Excite them! Arm them! Then turn them loose on the Reapers!

words Casey Loe

play: You said that players could avoid Shepard's death by making the "right choices." What constitutes a right choice?

Casey Hudson: Ideally there is no right choice, and that's the fun of having choices with consequences that match your decisions, so that you can find your own path through the game. But [such choices] actually don't affect the larger concept of Mass Effect 2, which is the idea of surviving a suicide mission. That is entirely based on whether you've built a team that is tough enough and loyal enough to keep you alive in the ending. It's kind of a *Dirty Dozen*-style story where you're trying to build a team of specialists that provide different important functions for your team, and it's important that you have enough of them, and that they're loyal to you—loyalty is a big part of the game. At some point you can make the decision as to whether you're ready to head off on this suicide mission or you want to continue building your team and your equipment and whatnot...Part of being serious about the idea of a suicide mission is that one of the possibilities has to be that your crew, and Shepard, can die.

Would you consider Shepard's death to be a bad ending?

CH: No, it's actually one of the main endings of the game. And as such, it's treated with the same sense that an ending to the game needs to feel epic, and satisfying, and victorious. It's just the heroic ending in which the main character has to die for his cause. Some people worry that we're giving away the ending or saying too much about it, but in a way the game is about the concept of facing what you're told is a suicide mission. That's just the premise of the game. What you're doing and where you're going...We haven't even really gone that much into that, and most of that will remain a mystery for people. We just

"There is a real risk as to whether the characters will survive the ending. And that adds a lot of weight to the choices you make."

It can be tough to stand out amidst the noise at E3, but the debut of Mass Effect 2 had little trouble rising above the din. After a playable demo that addressed virtually all of the complaints about the first Mass Effect—no lengthy elevator load times, more dynamic event scenes, more tactical combat, better gunfeel—Director Casey Hudson showed part of a potential ending that depicted the death of Shepard and the destruction of the Normandy. This is a possible consequence that awaits those who fail to make the right decisions while pursuing the game's central mission, and according to Hudson, that isn't a spoiler—it's the premise of the game.

As an attention-grabber, this reveal has worked perhaps too well, leaving Hudson deluged with questions from fans of the series. He was kind enough to sit down with *Play* and explain what happens when the hero dies in part two of a trilogy, address the controversy over Mass Effect 1's returning cast, and highlight some new features that have been overshadowed by the game's shocking premise.



want to make sure that people understand that when we say "you can die in this game," it's not like the way you can die in any game where you get a game-over screen and continue on to the ending. That's what's unique about this game—if you want to keep playing after the game is over you can, so you can carry your character over into the third game. But there is a real risk as to whether the characters will survive the ending. And that adds a lot of weight to the choices you make.

Do you hope people will honor the choices they make and accept their ending?

CH: It's not the kind of thing where you can just die and reload your previous save and then do something different. It's about playing the entire game through to the end. So if you do die in part of the ending, you can find a way to carry that character forward by going back to the middle of the game, the part where you're building up

your team and so on. But once you head into this huge and massively replayable ending, that's where you get to see all the decisions you made throughout the game coming to fruition, and right at the final moments of the game you see how everything plays out.

So what happens if you accept a noble death, and then Mass Effect 3 comes out and then you're, what...Playing a different person who is also named Shepard?

CH: Yeah, that's been one of the concepts that I think is hard for people to wrap their heads around. Mass Effect is a series about a main character, and that character is Commander Shepard. We're going to make Mass Effect 3 about Commander Shepard regardless...Part of the reality and the consequence of dying in Mass Effect 2 is that your character has had a great, amazing two-part story that ended in a climactic and satisfying way, but it wouldn't make sense to carry that forward to a new title if that character is dead.

But your character will still be named Shepard, and still have a backstory that involves previous events...?

CH: Well, it's about the canon of your story, right? So anyone can play Mass Effect 3, and start with a new character named Shepard, but it won't be *your* character, who you played two games with. Does that make sense?

Well, sort of. But do you think that will be satisfying for players who accepted their noble sacrifice in Mass Effect 2, and are now playing as the same guy again?

CH: I think people are preoccupied with this question of "let's say I let my character die, what are the ways I can continue to play Mass Effect 3?" To me, there are two possibilities: either you're not too worried about your character or your character's canon, and continuing your character forward into the next game, so you might as well just start with a new character. But if you are worried about your character being able to continue into Mass Effect 3, then you want to make sure you survive. Really, the idea is, if this is a suicide mission then you



"We got a lot of feedback that we were reusing things too much. So now we're taking the opposite approach, and it feels like every landing location has a completely unique concept."

have to have the possibility of dying. And if you have the possibility of dying, that should have some consequence, a consequence that ideally you want to avoid. So instead of designing the entire series to minimize the fact that you died at the end of Mass Effect 2, it's more that if you want to live past Mass Effect 2, you have to make sure that you can survive the ending.

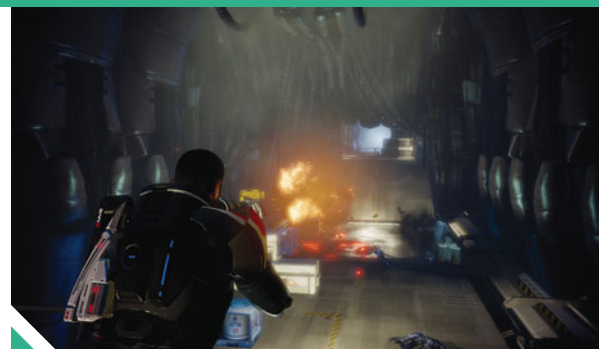
You also ran into some controversy about a comment that suggested the cast of Mass Effect 1 would not be playable in Mass Effect 2. Can you clarify that?

CH: That was a case where I think I was misquoted by one particular website, and all the other sites seemed to link to that site, and there was a huge outcry. What the had quoted me saying was that "every single character that you can get is a new character, and therefore nobody from the first game can be in your squad." But what I think I actually said is that we have a whole bunch of new characters, and some of them are completely new, new species and stuff like that. But of course, just because we have a lot of completely new characters doesn't mean we're not bringing back other characters. Then some of the sites were reporting that "we reversed our decision," but of course we're most of the way through development so that's not really possible.

Pretty much all of the squad members from the first game are in Mass Effect 2. And some of them will join you, and some of them are part of the main story. It's one of those things where, when people see it as a bullet point, they think "I want *everyone* in my squad," but to do it realistically, there are characters who have lives of their own, and reasons to join you or not...When you experience it as a player, it really makes sense why all of these different things happen....When people are actually immersed in the story, I think they'll be really happy that a lot of new faces join the squad and that the old characters are still in the story, and they're there in a way that reflects your decisions from the first game.

It must be very flattering that people were so passionate about the characters.

CH: Yeah, that's the good thing about all of this stuff,

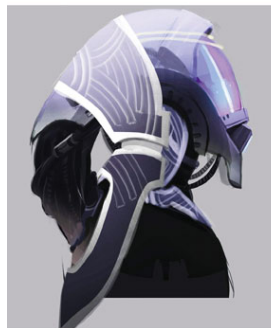


including people wondering about what happens if you die, and worrying about whether we're spoiling the ending and so on. It comes from a real passion for the story, and from an anxiety over whether we're going to get this game right. That's obviously our whole focus, taking what we built in the first one and building a lot of great new content, and improving the experience in each new aspect.

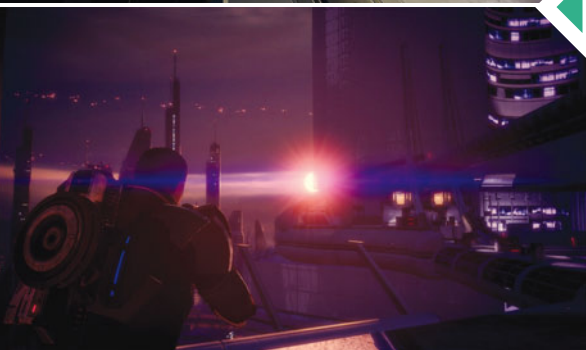
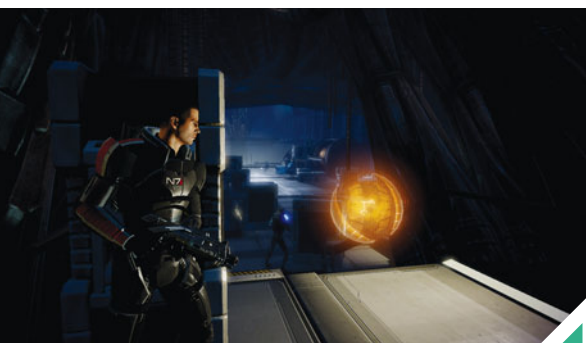
With so much focus on the story, are there any other aspects of the sequel that you feel are being overshadowed?

CH: Yeah, we've improved literally every aspect of the





“It’s totally understandable that when you say ‘you might die at the end of this game,’ people become preoccupied with the question of ‘what if I do?’”



game from the overall feel of the shooter mechanics—the way you aim and move. We have a completely new cover system, and new AI for your squad and enemies. You have much more ability to tactically move your squad; you can move them independently, and give them context-sensitive attack orders for enemies. And you can do all this stuff now in real time without pausing. You can still pause if you want to be tactical, but generally you’ll want to play it out mostly in real time—it just plays a lot better. We’ve made improvements like that in pretty much every area from conversations and cinematics to space exploration.

When Mass Effect 1 was originally demoed, it had a lot of similar-sounding features, but they were cut before release. Is this a return to the original battle system, or something new?

CH: What we showed originally in some of the early Mass Effect 1 demos was a way to, in a traditional RPG sense, pause the action and move little symbols around the battlefield for where you wanted your characters. And then you go back into real time and things just kind of play out. As part of that you could physically take control of other characters and run around as Garrus and Ashley and do stuff like that. But we were trying to take it more in the direction of the game being about Commander Shepard, and being able to command the squad more in real time from Commander Shepard’s perspective. And

the way [the final version] played was better than the way we initially demoed it...it just didn’t play as well as what we ultimately had.

Mass Effect 2 takes it even further where you can now order your squad from Commander Shepard’s perspective in a more real-time sense. Specifically, you point at the ground, you hit a button, and a specific character will run there. You point at an enemy, you hit a different button, and now a different specific character will do a power on that guy. You can really control the battlefield and control the squad in real time with the same kind of tactics we had in those early demos, but now it’s more at your fingertips.

You mentioned improvements in the way you handle space exploration?

CH: First of all, the way that you get to these planets is a little bit different. You still have the galaxy map, but now you’re pushing deeper into space, so you’re starting to burn fuel as a resource. That helps you feel like you’re making decisions about how you get really far into space, and when you’ll be out of gas, and when you need to turn around. And then, when you get to a planet, instead of just a button click that tells you whether you can land or not, there’s now a whole level of interactivity where you can scan the planet, you’re getting readings from it, and it’s a tactile thing where you can feel the controller as it rumbles, and you’re listening for sounds and looking for





visual indicators...From that you're able to find yourself good places to land, or send space probes and so on. Finally, when you actually do get to these landing sites, we've taken really the opposite approach from Mass Effect 1. In Mass Effect 1 we had a really ambitious game before we integrated the idea of uncharted worlds, and what we were trying to do was reuse things as

much as possible. And we got a lot of feedback that we were reusing things too much. So now we're taking the opposite approach, and it feels like every landing location has a completely unique concept. It's got its own science-fiction hook that's different from anything else you can do in the Mass Effect universe...They have more story, they have different art, different combat. And since we're starting from the approach that they have to start out with a unique idea, they end up feeling very diverse.

So you can no longer explore freely without consequence?

CH: I think people want to explore freely, but things that are free are not very fun. If you had unlimited money in a game from the very beginning, it would make the whole store system of buying weapons and upgrading no fun at all...The actual fun comes from making decisions about what you value more. Part of the problem with Mass Effect 1 was that as soon as you get the ship, the entire galaxy is there for you. It was overwhelming, and it also makes the value of getting to each location less important. But in Mass Effect 2, you'll have to think about, "OK, I have this many space probes and this much fuel... What's the most interesting thing I've heard of out there in space that I can get to?" And it makes it really fun when you decide to take a gamble and go somewhere far away.

After burning a lot of fuel and spending a bunch of money to get there, you feel that much more special to actually land on the surface and see what's going on there.

Are you still using the Paragon/Renegade system of morality?

CH: We still have paragon and renegade as a way for the player to keep track of the preponderance of decisions they've made. But in general, the way that we implement the actual choices, we're trying to bring more and more sophistication into. So you still have the paragon-style decisions and renegade-style decisions, but ultimately all that's supposed to do is to try and capture a summary of whether you're making decisions that are quicker and more self-serving, versus things that are harder and carry more of a sacrifice on your part.

Let me ask about your plans for DLC. How can you expand a game that ends with a suicide mission?

CH: It's totally understandable that when you say "you might die at the end of this game," people become preoccupied with the question of "what if I do?" But I think actually most people are going to survive. If you ignore the concept of the suicide mission and having to build a good team, and you build a bad team and they're poorly equipped, then it will be a bloodbath and you're going to get slaughtered. But most people won't. I think most people will live through the ending, and if they do that, then they get to play past the ending. And that's how in Mass Effect 2, you can continue to do downloadable content. The game goes on after the story. You can finish missions from the original game, whatever you haven't done, but you can also go out and download new content of various sizes... That's another thing we wanted to improve from Mass Effect 1. We weren't able to produce as much downloadable content as we actually wanted to. With Mass Effect 2 we're building the systems so that we can have more types of downloadable content, and release them more frequently.

Any possibility of content that isn't focused on Shepard, but that may put another character in a lead role?

CH: That's definitely a possibility. One of the things that we try to be conscious of is that the Mass Effect universe is big enough to tell so many different stories, and you may want to know what life is like deeper in the Citadel, or off in new parts of the galaxy. We've explored that in some of the novels for example, and I think it's a real fun way to springboard off of the core story...I think that's a potential idea for downloadable content. [play](#)



Dragon Age: Origins

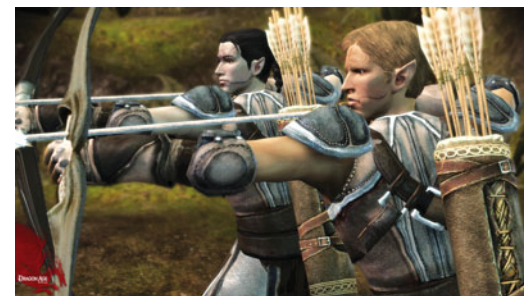
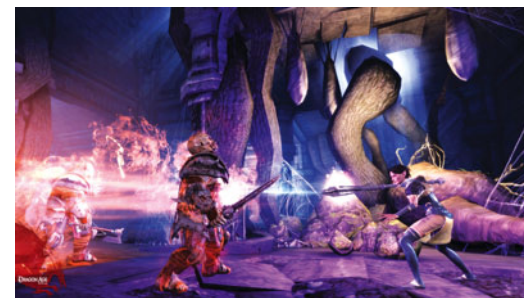
Sex sex sex and don't forget the violence

words Casey Loe

The official small-talk question of E3 is "what have you liked?" and I got a lot of strange looks when I responded with "Dragon Age: Origins." The backlash didn't really catch me by surprise; no one thought much of the game's ubiquitous trailer, which featured a montage of polygon-doll sex scenes and splattering blood, set to Marilyn Manson howling "are you motherf***ing ready for the new shit!" But a good hour of hands-on time with Dragon Age's heavily customizable combat and open-ended storylines reminded me why I had cared in the first place: This does indeed seem to be the spiritual successor to BioWare's seminal Baldur's Gate series—in terms of game design, at least, if

not theme.

At a surface level, the game does resemble the company's recent RPG-Lite console efforts, with players taking full control of a single hero while the computer AI handles the rest of the party. "We wanted to make it feel a little more action-y on consoles," explains BioWare CEO and co-founder Ray Muzyka. "You can do all the things you can do on PC, but when you take control of one character we wanted it to feel very tight—you hit the A button to swing your sword or fire a bow or launch a spell." But for those who are willing to open up a menu or two, Dragon Age can go a whole lot deeper. Muzyka likens the layering of customizable systems to an onion that players



"This does indeed seem to be the spiritual successor to BioWare's seminal Baldur's Gate series."

can peel to their individual tastes. For a bit more control, you can switch your party members to different presets, telling them to focus on ranged combat or healing. Peel a layer deeper, and you can dictate their exact behavior in specific situations, using a system similar to the gambits in Final Fantasy XII. Peel off yet another layer, and you can micromanage your entire party by setting the game to pause after each action and await your specific instructions.

BioWare co-founder Greg Zeschuk knows that the marketing focus on sex and gore has drawn criticism from some hardcore fans, but is thrilled with the "surprise factor" it's elicited from wider audiences. "Fantasy has always had an almost aseptic, wussy image. But our games are serious. We want to make sure that that seriousness comes across to the market, so players don't assume it's all elves sashaying across the countryside." He cites the dark, bloody tone of Michael Moorcock's Elric novels and the pain and tragedy of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice & Fire* series as some of the game's inspirations, but with a touch of Tolkien that "provides a heroic aspect other dark games haven't had."

One of Dragon Age's narrative innovations is the ability to choose an origin for your hero, which determines the game's opening scenario, some of the abilities and companions you'll gain, and becomes an enduring subplot throughout your quest. To assess the amount of sashaying in the game, I created an elf and assigned him an origin that included a sheltered background and a deep



Giant bugs always
make great enemies.



distrust for humanity. The game opened with an encounter with three humans who had wandered into the elven forest, and I had total freedom to deal with them as I saw fit; I could allow their kind words to soften my heart, or I could heed the advice of my human-hating companion and take a harder tone. (I appreciated the option to kill just one as a warning to the other two, but in the end I butchered the whole lot of them.) Letting players do bad things is hardly a new concept in western RPGs, but *Dragon Age* has a more subtle and believable treatment of morality than most. The game keeps track of your actions, but doesn't divide them into good or bad deeds or place you on a path towards some moral extreme. You're free to carve out your own twisted morality, murdering round-ears without mercy

or provocation, while simultaneously being a paragon of the elven community, saving elf lives, protecting elf villages, and helping elf ladies cross elf streets. The decisions you make will make will have a huge impact on your game; determining not merely how characters treat you and what side quests are available, but opening up massive chunks of terrain that are only accessible for certain types of characters.

I'm not particularly excited about the dynamic blood-splatter system or the option to have PG-13 sex with low-polygon-count party members, but I am quite eager to sink my teeth into a console RPG that offers both a fully-functioned party-combat system and a wide degree of player freedom. Yes, Mr. Manson, I am indeed motherf**king ready for this new shit. [play](#)





Brink

When utopia collapses and you're forced to take sides, how will you cope?

words Douglass C. Perry

A veritable confluence of forces—including a shrinking PC market, piracy, and decreased sales—has shifted once pure PC developers into console development. From Bungie to id, Epic to BioWare, 2K Boston (formerly Irrational Games) to DICE to Gearbox and

a dozen others, these creative teams over the last eight to 10 years have shaped the current console games we play. Splash Damage, the independent British dev team behind PC games Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory and Enemy Territory: Quake Wars, has teamed up with Bethesda (once a PC-dominant developer), now in its new role as publisher, to further the evolution.

In development with Brink, a first-person

shooter touching upon a futuristic utopian Green movement, Splash Damage hopes to fuse console sensibilities with PC-like musculature to create the Arnold Schwarzenegger of first-person shooters.

The storyline reads something like a mash-up of the utopian fiction novel Ecotopia and the expensive flop Waterworld, and takes place in 2035. Years before the Earth's arctic poles started melting, a band of Green socialistas envisioned a better world. They created the Ark, a self-sufficient, 100 percent green network of floating islands, purposely isolated from the corruption of the civilized world. As they predicted, the Earth's core temperature rose, melting the ice caps and flooding the continents—wiping out millions of people and leaving the Ark as one of the few places on the planet to emigrate to.

But after 25 years of social unrest and a growing stream of desperate immigrants, the Ark's society splinters into two warring factions, the Ark-supported Security and the Resistance, a band of well-armed discontents, each aiming to take control over the Ark.

This colorful backstory explains the setting in which you will fight in single-player, co-op, and multiplayer modes, and it makes for a classic utopian-society-gone-wrong narrative that appears to share more with 2K Boston's BioShock and EA's Mirror's Edge than first meets the eye. In our demo, we watched Paul Wedgewood, Splash Damage founder and studio director, enter two locations, an abandoned airport and dockyards, where he demonstrated the S.M.A.R.T. button (Smooth Movement Across





Rugged Terrain), a key facet of Brink. The SMART button enables players to point their character toward an otherwise difficult obstacle, be it a rooftop or a large gap, and makes it a non-issue. Wedgewood pointed his character to a 20-foot wide gap and pressed a button with the right timing, and we watched the character leap over it. He jumped from lobby floors to second story hallways, slid under blockades, and jumped on building tops, all the while showing a silky-looking animation process.

Wedgewood then demoed the first step of the game's customization components, showing off a set of rather grungy, cartoony English facial models to select. There were crunched, elongated, and highly detailed mugs (including stubby facial hair, creased chins, high cheekbones, and wrinkled skin), all of which resembled criminals from the 1930s, adding an odd tinge to the sleek futuristic Ark architecture.

The character customization options go deep. Players can dress up their characters with hairstyles, skin color, scars, tattoos, hats, vests, and bloody bandages. The game gives you a limited number of customization options with which to begin, and then rewards you with points for kills, weapons variation, and more, to upgrade weapons, customize those upgrades, and unlock new abilities, classes, and mission types.

But like so much in Brink, something deeper complements the vast array of customization options. Much like Ubisoft's Rainbow Six character-building system, Splash Damage's character growth system works both off and online. Players can take their character from the story mode to the multiplayer mode and back again, all the while earning persistent character points.

Splash Damage hopes to solve the issue of blindly picking a class before a mission begins by peppering the environments with command

Waterworld meets Ecotopia.
Where's Dennis Hopper when you need him?

posts, enabling players to switch classes to solve the issue at hand. Wedgewood demonstrated how a rocket launcher-wielding soldier could switch to an engineer to hold off a violent surge of enemies. How? By laying down a brutally powerful automatic turret, and then tinkering with an electronic device to progress through the mission. There are at least four classes that we have seen, including operative, medic, soldier, and engineer.

When switching classes, the soldier class is granted heavy weaponry, operatives stealthy tools, and medics a variety of medicine. The game recognizes when players switch classes, issuing different objectives than the previous class was given, thus changing the mission objectives for participating players as well. In fact, Brink dynamically generates all objectives, communications, inventory items, and missions based on your role, progress, location, squad mates, and battle conditions.

Like the best finely-tuned PC first-person shooters, Brink plays fast and frenetic. Splash Damage designed Brink with multiplayer dynamics built into core, giving 2-8 players the chance to experience hardcore online play. Look for it to hit retail shelves in spring 2010 for PC, PS3, and Xbox 360. [play](#)



“The colorful backstory . . . makes for a classic utopian-society-gone-wrong narrative.”





Heavy Rain

When it rains, it pours

words Casey Loe

“Heavy Rain is not about shooting or driving or solving puzzles,” explains writer and director David Cage. “It’s all about storytelling, it’s all about emotion. It’s all about making choices and seeing how they affect how the story is told.” Lofty quotes like that and a series of stunning tech demos had tongues wagging about Heavy Rain for years, but the hype train was nearly derailed when Cage finally explained how the game would play, and said those three terrible letters: “Q-T-E.”

Quick Time Events, where players use timed



button presses to influence the flow of cut scenes, were an integral part of classics like Shenmue or God of War. But a hundred lesser games have tarnished the term to the extent that learning a game uses QTEs is now roughly analogous to learning that your prom date has HIV, or that your drink’s been spiked with GHB. Cage is not oblivious to the criticism, and seems almost at the point of tears when defending his decision to use them. “We know this is not a popular type of interface,” he concedes. “[People imagine] pressing a button every 10 minutes as a nice cutscene plays. That is *not* what we’re doing. We’re working on something that is really second-to-second gameplay.” To

back up his point, he loads up a scene in which an FBI profiler named Jayden is tracking a clue that he hopes will lead to the infamous Origami Killer. It takes place in a car junkyard, where Jayden can freely explore the environment as he searches for evidence. Tapping buttons bring up lists of options that swirl around Jayden’s torso, each mapped to a different face button of the PS3 controller. One menu brings up his thoughts, allowing you to tap a word like “Cold” or “Car” to recall the events that lead him here. Another option menu allows him to fire up his ARI (“Augmented Reality Interface”), a set of VR goggles and gloves that fills the environment with forensic data that Jayden can examine,

revealing the existence of pollen, blood spray, and other promising clues.

The first QTE kicks in when Jayden begins interrogating a junkyard worker. First the buttons represent dialogue options, then, when the conversation goes horribly wrong, each option becomes a means with which Jayden can defend himself, by reaching for his gun, or a pipe, or throwing a punch. This is only the first of several knock-down, drag-out fights in this scenario, and though each is packed with options, none of them are immediate dead ends. "Failure won't lead you to a game over situation, just as in a real fight you can take some punches and kicks and still win," explains Cage. Sure enough, some of the tactics pay off—throwing a quick punch, grabbing a 2x4—while others get Jayden a beating that leave his suit impressively muddled but his will to fight intact. To demonstrate how the scenario can go wrong, Cage repeatedly makes bad choices, allowing Jayden to be pummeled into unconsciousness. That isn't quite the end—he awakens cuffed to the steering wheel of his car, just as it's being lowered into an industrial crusher. The key to this last-chance QTE is to recall a throw-away moment at the beginning of the scene, in which Jayden glanced at a gun in his glove compartment. Quickly putting the pieces together and tapping the button mapped to the glove compartment would provide a way out—but Cage hesitates, and Jayden dies screaming.

And the game goes on. "There is no game over," Cage explains. "You're not going to go back and replay this scene again. The story continues, and Jayden is dead. This is what makes the story unique to your game." In fact, Jayden is one of four main characters, and any one of them is capable of catching the Origami Killer. The game now switches to a second character, a photographer named Madison who is pursuing the case for reasons that have not yet been revealed. She had previously found a clue that pointed to the owner of a sleazy night club; a clue that Jayden also discovered before he was crushed into a sticky red paste. "Jayden and Madison can cross paths in this night club, and something completely different will happen," explains Cage. But with Jayden dead, Madison must go it alone.

Once again, the scene begins with a bit of free exploration, in which Madison locates the club owner, but is blocked by a bouncer who insists that his boss must not be disturbed. A bit of observation will reveal that the club owner isn't too busy for his more scantily-clad customers, and that gives Madison a possible opening. Walk her to the bathroom, and the first of a series of highly unusual QTEs begin. As she preens in the mirror, you can tap buttons corresponding to various body parts—tap her face and she'll apply a new coat of make-up, her skirt to have her tear it down to a more adventurous length, and her top to open the upper buttons of her blouse. A sexy QTE dance from the sluttied-up Madison will now catch the club owner's eye, and earn her an invitation to his private office.

What happens next easily delivers on Cage's previous promise of hard-M adult gaming. Showing no interest in discussing the killer, the club owner pulls a gun on Madison, and demands she start removing her clothing. The QTE options swirl around Madison, the words literally trembling to reflect her emotional state. Until she can find a solution, she has to remove



"There is no game over. You're not going to go back and replay this scene again." – Director David Cage



Madison faces a tough choice—strip or struggle?

an article of clothing (your choice) every time he raises the gun. I have no idea how far this scene can go—there were still options to remove clothing when Madison was down to her bra and panties, but at that point Cage instead hit the button mapped to the conspicuously heavy lamp behind her. You can guess what happened next. "The QTEs are not only about fighting," explains Cage. "You'll be surprised at the diversity of the situations and the actions you can use."

The entirety of Heavy Rain is composed of these bite-sized, QTE-packed vignettes. There are over 60 in all, each set in a unique location. "They're usually around 15 minutes long, and then it's on to another character, another situation, another challenge...The pacing of the game should be quite fast," promises Cage. The story will always follow the same basic progression, although any two players will likely see the plot points unfold in drastically different ways, based on the decisions they make and which characters are alive to pursue each clue. "I would like people to play this game without

playing too much with the save system," says Cage. "Yeah, maybe they'll miss something, or some characters will die, but they'll have a unique experience, a unique story that they'll have written themselves." To put it less poetically, if you try to beat the game's auto-save system by resetting while Jayden is being pulped, you'll never get to see what color panties Madison is wearing.

But what if Madison never noticed that lamp? And what if the other two as-yet-unrevealed characters die too? "If all four characters die, it's the end of the story. It will be a very sad story, of four characters who died trying to catch a serial killer." Even then, Cage promises it will have been "a full experience," and one gets the impression that if he had his way, the disc would immediately self-destruct, leaving nothing but a wisp of smoke wafting from the drive tray of your PS3. "I know it sounds weird, but I'd prefer people play through [Heavy Rain] once, and then maybe never replay it again. But," he adds with a laugh, "keep it, don't sell it." [play](#)

Alan Wake

Remedy shines some light on their dark thriller

words Matt Cabral

As surprised as I was that Alan Wake finally came out of hiding for this year's E3, I was even more taken aback by the gameplay direction this long-anticipated title seemed to be taking. While early glimpses appeared to sell it as a cinematic adventure—not unlike the upcoming *Heavy Rain*—it's actually much more a straightforward, albeit highly ambitious, take on survival horror. But, given that *Resident Evil* all but abandoned its bump-in-the-the-night roots for all out zombie-slaughtering action, and *Silent Hill* simply lost its way, I wholeheartedly welcome Wake to carry the mantle of my most beloved genre.

Ripped from the pages of a Stephen King novel, Wake's story involves the titular horror writer vacationing with his wife in a small, woodsy coastal town. His spouse soon vanishes, and Alan finds himself alone in a strange place where a disturbing turn of events begins taking shape, among them the macabre narrative of his next novel beginning to manifest in reality. The primary gameplay premise is the use of light and dark; during the day Alan can explore the creepy town, but at night things become possessed by the darkness. Townsfolk turn into axe-wielding psychos, animals become rabid beasts, and even machinery roars to life—during my demo, I witnessed a bulldozer transform into a metallic incarnation of evil.

Defeating the darkness and all it possesses is a strategic two-step process. Equipped with a flashlight, Alan must shine its beam at enemies, then take them down with more conventional means. And while a battery-powered lantern and a six-shooter will certainly clear a room of crazed townies, a flare and shotgun will do it with far more style. With this arsenal equipped, Alan can light the sky in a crimson haze—which, by the way, nicely shows off the title's impressive lighting tech—right before unloading shells into a crowd of approaching whack-jobs. This mechanic is ripe with inventive, tension-building

moments; Alan, for example, will frantically crank light-emitting generators while aggressors nip at his heels, bathe baddies in vehicles' high beams before making road kill of them, and use the game's limited light sources sparingly to survive long enough to unravel the mystery that's enveloped the town of Bright Falls. The coolest narrative trick during my demo gave way to a cliffhanger worthy of a televised drama like *LOST*; with attackers closing in, Alan was visibly relieved as he breathlessly

reached a lighthouse, but the safe haven's light source suddenly and mysteriously went black, leaving Wake (and me) pondering his fate.

As impressed as I was with the leave-the-lights-on gameplay and the potential for rich horror storytelling, the setting actually left the strongest impression. My favorite part of 2008's *Condemned 2* was a level set deep in a wooded area, where players faced a grizzly bear in a log cabin. Similarly, films like *Insomnia*, *Shoot to Kill*, *The Edge*, and *Deliverance* have done a fine job of turning the beautiful backdrop of the great outdoors into a fright-filled place that stretches nerves to their breaking point and sets neck hairs standing on end. Alan Wake looks to tap into this same source for its frights, with a presentation oozing a similar sense of serenity contrasted with scariness. If the story, complemented by “previously on” and “next on” segments, can chill the bones as effectively as the setting and gameplay, then Alan Wake could be looking at a bright-as daylight-future. [play](#)



“Townsfolk turn into axe-wielding psychos, animals become rabid beasts, and even machinery roars to life.”





words Douglass C. Perry

It's 2027 and the New World Order hasn't turned out according to plan. A global energy crisis has lasted more than 10 years and caused a broad and devastating effect on the world. After a devastating war with North Korea, it now occupies a crippled, torn United States of America. You're a soldier in an American Civilian Resistance, an underground militia that drifts from empty suburb to suburb, seeking shelter and resources as it recruits ordinary citizens to counter the North Korean occupation.

You've just awakened; you're given a survey of the makeshift grounds, the windmills, the eco-fuel tanks, the broken-down two-story houses used as campsites. Suddenly you're spotted. The Koreans have infiltrated the town perimeter. Jet engines are heard roaring in the distance. It's time to fight.

This is the bleak fictional setting New York developer Kaos Studios devised to raise your nationalistic hackles and prep you for war in an all-new first-person shooter. Written by screenwriter and director John Milius (Apocalypse Now, Red Dawn, Dirty Harry)—a member of the board of directors of the National Rifle Association (NRA)—Homefront promises to deliver heavy combat using a brand new engine in a story-driven single-player campaign, a 32-player multiplayer campaign, and co-op modes.

Our demo produced a fierce battle where your team uses naturalistic terrain—cars,

“The Koreans have infiltrated the town perimeter. It's time to fight.”



Homefront

When North Korea occupies the US, the only option is to fight.



houses, stone walls—as cover, while producing an impressive particle engine which saw massive clouds of smoke, flying debris, fire, and explosions—including blasts that hurled enemies backward arching into the sky.

“Our story-telling engine uses in-game, scripted sequences to put you into the narrative,” said producer Erin Daly, Kaos Studios. “We’ve named it the Drama Engine because the camera focuses on high-intensity action.” Illustrating the point in a scripted sequence, the first-person camera looks up at the passing jets, then quickly jolts toward the incoming infantry, spread through the neighborhood, then seamlessly transitions the controls to the player.

As the occupied forces spread into camp, they

threaten to cut off communications. The dynamic camera captures the arrival of your resistance team's best threat, the Goliath, bursting through a nearby house. Just like in Kaos's previous FPS, Frontlines: Fuel of War, Homefront is studded with vehicles, gadgets, and super cool futuristic tools to combat the enemy. The independent-suspension, six-wheeled remote controlled vehicle can travel just about anywhere, as was demonstrated when it rode straight over a nearby sedan, and it packs a massive cannon shot. “You direct the Goliath's path, and it finds them,” explained Daly. “It will run over anything.” If Homefront is anything like Frontlines, it should be packed with remote controlled stealth, aerial and explosive gadgets to aid your campaign. [play](#)



Just Cause 2

Pack your sunblock...and a stunt parachute

words Matt Cabral

Long before “GTA clone” became a regularly slung term in the industry, Eidos Interactive and Avalanche Studios took a crack at the flourishing sandbox formula with Just Cause. The title was developed simultaneously for last- and current-gen hardware, and its buggyness and lack of polish certainly reflected

this. Still, its clever use of parachuting and grappling mechanics gave gamers something Grand Theft Auto lacked. Looking at the sequel, it's obvious the developers have a console generation that's in full horsepower-humming swing; the visuals are gorgeous, the gameplay totally revamped, and the adrenaline-spiking action is typically only found in Michael Bay-helmed blockbusters.

Coming out of an E3 packed with spotlight-stealing titles, Just Cause was no doubt somewhat overlooked, but my brief time with it skyrocketed it to the top of my must-play list. In total “we’re not ‘effing around” fashion, the developer-driven demo began with returning regime-tackler Rico Rodriguez base jumping off a skyscraper. After nearly kissing the pavement, he pulled his chute, landed in the cockpit of a

speed boat, and crashed that sucker—right after narrowly escaping with his chute, of course—into a heavily guarded military harbor. From here I was treated to a host of new grappling and parachute assisted tricks. Rico can use his handy hook in ways Capcom’s bionic-armed hero never dreamed of; first up, he tethered two baddies to each other, and sent them flying toward one another for a double brain-bashing kill. Next, he shot the hook into a henchman’s chest, then into a propane cylinder, and with a well placed slug, he sent the tank—and the unfortunate militant—off like a deflating balloon. Other creative kills included stringing enemies up to make easy targets of them, and attaching them to speeding vehicles—can you say “road rash”?

In between humiliating the opposition, Rico fluidly navigated the war zone with his stunt chute. And, when he was done playing with the gun-toting goons, he glided towards some fuel tanks—rocket launcher in hand—and brought the mission to an explosive conclusion. Rico was merely warming up, though, as the next mission saw him high-jacking a chopper, rescuing an informant from the sky walk of a mountainside casino, then surfing atop the roofs of speeding enemy vehicles. Here, I witnessed him hopping from car to car with his parachute, pausing just long enough to plant bricks of C4. As you can imagine, this fueled a car chase sequence that made the Bourne movies look like driver’s ed class.

All this barely-catch-your-breath action unfolded over a beautifully rendered tropical setting—the type of place you’d totally want to vacation in...if you could replace the fanatical gunmen with Mojito-serving waiters. I only got a teasing taste of what Avalanche has in store for thrill-seeking gamers, but if the controls can keep pace with the whiz-bang gameplay and postcard-perfect presentation, then Just Cause 2 may finally give those Liberty City troublemakers a run for their drug money. [play](#)

“My brief time with Just Cause 2 skyrocketed it to the top of my must-play list.”



Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: The Crystal Bearers

GTA-inspired Fantasy

words Heather Anne Campbell

Square Enix is known for bringing the best polish out of a console, and their new Wii game, Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: The Crystal Bearers is no exception. Gorgeous throughout, the game demonstrates the power under the hood of Nintendo's system. But what about experience?

We sat down with producer Kawazu Akitoshi to discuss the long-awaited update to the franchise.

play: So, my first question is: The game was announced a long, long time ago. Why did it go quiet for so long? Was there a change in direction of the game at that point, or was it announced early to build long-term excitement for the title?

Kawazu Akitoshi: It was a trial-and-error type thing. Rather than trying to create buzz in the market, it's a result of a completely new system for us.

How much does The Crystal Bearers tie into previous Crystal Chronicles games, and how much is totally new? If I were to define them, console Crystal Chronicles games are about multiplayer gaming, and dragging that terrible pot around on the map. This game is more of a solo experience?

Akitoshi: It's different from the past Crystal Chronicles titles in terms of the multiplayer. There are still four tribes, so the basic settings are the same. However, this game is focused on solo-play, so that experience is going to be different. When this game was announced, it was the same timing as the DS title, and the idea was that this would be a solo game, and the DS would be the multiplayer game, and we stuck to that plan. DS has the online networking—which the Wii also has—but it's not like the DS, where you can connect with your friends right in front of you. So, we focused more on the Wii's unique controller—that was our focus for the game.

Do you feel pressured to include elements of the Wii controller into the RPG experience, or did you see Crystal Bearers as your opportunity to make a game based on the Wii controller? Was it RPG first, controller second, or did you see the controller and think, we want to make an RPG for that?

Akitoshi: There was no pressure, actually. At the beginning of development, I directed the team: You don't have to force yourself to use the Wii controller's functionality. You don't have to use it. However, being that the protagonist's ability is to control gravity, the Wii remote came in handy, and gradually they decided to make full use of the Wii controller's abilities. So, there was no pressure, but as a result of development, the game uses the Wii's features.

How large was the team during development?

Akitoshi: It fluctuates, but around fifty.

It seems to me that the Crystal Chronicles is the "steam-punk" counterpart to the main, numbered series move towards "cyber-punk." Is that something I'm reading into the games, or is that a decision on the part of the design teams—looking back versus looking forward, nostalgia versus premonition?

Akitoshi: Well, the Crystal Chronicles development team mainly comes from Final Fantasy IX, so that's the

foundation. There's also Toshiyuki Itahana, the main character designer—there's that influence. Hopefully that's enough of an answer?

Hmm. Well, what films, television, books, music influence this series? Whether it be games from your childhood, or a movie that you happened to see when you went into production?

Akitoshi: As for this particular game, I was inspired by Grand Theft Auto.

Really!? I didn't see that coming. Because of the open-world experience...or something else?

Akitoshi: You're right-on about that. I wanted to experience that freedom in the game world.

How much competition is there between the numbered Final Fantasy games and the Crystal Chronicles games? Are there any internal company

"To talk about RPGs, well, Japanese RPGs are derived from American RPGs if you look back in history."

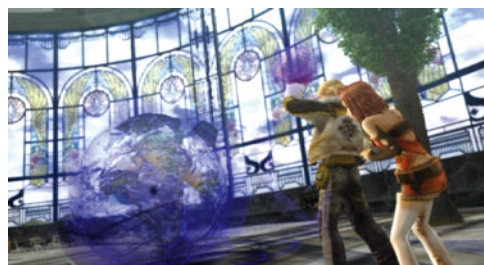
rivalries, battling for which is the "real" Final Fantasy experience?

Akitoshi: Well, we all get along! But we're working on very different platforms...but there's this feeling of—I want to create something really good. Even better, maybe. We still have that pride.

Do you specifically hand-pick your development teams, and if so, what qualities do you look for in your team?

Akitoshi: It's not like the producer gets to pick the team, because we're working for this big company, Square Enix. However, I as the producer, I get to make large decisions, and I make sure, you know, that the team is cool with it.

Now that you've mentioned Grand Theft Auto, I can't help but think about the differences between Western games, and games developed in Japan. Specifically,



there's a different methodology in Western RPGs, than say, Final Fantasy. Would you comment on what you think those differences are, and do you think Crystal Chronicles is bridging the gap between the open RPGs of the west, and the tight, linear narrative of the traditional Final Fantasy games?

Akitoshi: To talk about RPGs, well, Japanese RPGs are derived from American RPGs if you look back in history. Japanese RPGs just focus more on the story—that tight story. But the essences of them are not that different. Western RPGs just tend more toward freedom, and Japanese RPGs prefer that character development. With this title, we did focus more on freedom, so in this sense, you could say it's like a bridge, but we didn't really aim for it. It's just that there's more freedom, but the elements are still a traditional Japanese RPG, with a tight story. I like that kind of story, the tight story. I think it helps the user enjoy all the elements—if there's too much freedom, then the player doesn't know what to do, and he can't enjoy everything that's out there.

There was a large amount of customizability in the first Crystal Chronicles game for the Gamecube; you could determine many things about the main character, like the family history, the race. This game has a very strong, defined protagonist. Was that a

response to complaints about the original game, or was it something that Square Enix dictated for The Crystal Bearers, or was it something that you wanted?

Akitoshi: It isn't that there were complaints. It's more like, there was something that we wanted to focus on. Meaning, in this title, we wanted to focus on that storyline. So, we eliminated those features. This is more of an action game, and because we only have so much time we can spend on each game, so as a result, there's less customization.

I guess, as a final question, I'd love to know: When you go home, do you watch fantasy and science fiction, or, because you're working on this fantastic game, do you prefer cop dramas and serious courtroom stuff? Or do you feel that the game influences you to have more whimsical interests?

Akitoshi: I used to really like sci-fi—that's how I got started in the game biz. I loved Star Wars. Now, I don't even touch sci-fi books, or novels. I care more for documentary T.V., and when I read, I prefer history.

Is there maybe a non-fiction, documentary-influenced game in your future?

Akitoshi: Personally, I would like to expand the kinds of titles I create. Right now, working for Square Enix, it's a small world. Personally, I feel like there should be more occupations in the game world. So yeah, maybe. Hopefully. [play](#)



Demon's Souls

A devilish surprise

words Brady Fiechter



Let's recap: "Thanks to the completely under-the-radar Demon's Souls, I've just had my most rewarding first-time experience with a new game since the NES era." Those words come from Nick Des Barres and his experience with our import review of Demon's Souls in the May issue of Play. Now that the game is out of the bag, post-E3 and post-Nick's raves, I come to the table tainted but no less enthusiastic to sample this nightmarish world.

Nick was lucky that Demon's Souls was exactly what he likes out of a game, because if you were to dive into this action role-player with no knowledge of its devious ways, you could very easily be set up for an opposing quote: "This is the most annoying game I've played since the NES era."

You see, Demon's Souls is hard. Hard in that hardcore sort of way. Hard in that way that pushes you to master its systems, be ready for countless deaths, struggle in some ruthless ways that make you smile because you know it's just not fair, but so damned fun—if that's your thing. Imagine death as a tool for learning, and imagine scenes where a giant killer ball rolls down a stairs to crush you, just because you deserved to be crushed without warning.

The first time you die you'll be tossed back into a small hub-based area called the Nexus, which feels like the inside of a giant castle foyer that winds its way around portals into the game's five central locations. It is here that the game demonstrates its Japanese sensibilities early on, building that dream-like spirit and strange wonder that games like this are known for. There is no technical magnificence to Demon's Souls; its strong appeal stems from the color and texture of its demonic visions, the way a level is laid out to make you feel like you're in a magical and real place. I appreciate when a game makes me stop and observe, simply because I was led to through the prodding of design as much as sheer presentation.

I can't speak to the complexities of its deepest design conceits, but the several hours I spent with Demon's Souls impressed me in the way it ramps up its tactics, and the game feels really good from the start; swinging a sword, tossing a

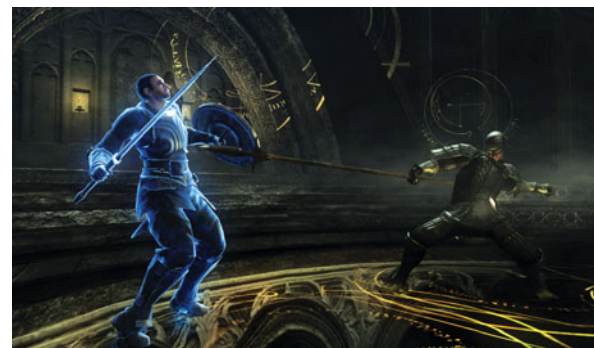


potion, and evading an attack all satisfy, and it must be noted that the difficulty does not stem from clumsy design choices. When you don't get the game, it wants you to understand why and call on your skills to avoid the next pitfall. There's a ton of typical, statistical veins to its role-playing heart, but there's more here than pen-and-paper niggling.

One of the cool ways From Software packaged the idea of dying is by stealing your soul. Die, and you can rejoin your spirit in the main world. You can also play online and observe the ghosts of other heros, read notes left behind, even alter the world with your choices and join in someone else's fight.

"Imagine death as a tool for learning..."

This is what games do best: bring you pure fantasy.



Splinter Cell: Conviction

Game industry to HUD programmers: I hear Starbucks is hiring.

words Casey Loe

In a teaser trailer released in early 2007, we learned that Splinter Cell hero Sam Fisher went into hiding after the murder of his daughter and subsequent arrest by the US government. I guess he did a pretty damn good job of lying low, since we didn't hear a peep about Splinter Cell: Conviction in the two years that followed. But now Sam has surfaced again, in a game that bears only a passing resemblance to the Splinter Cell: Conviction that was last shown more than two years ago.

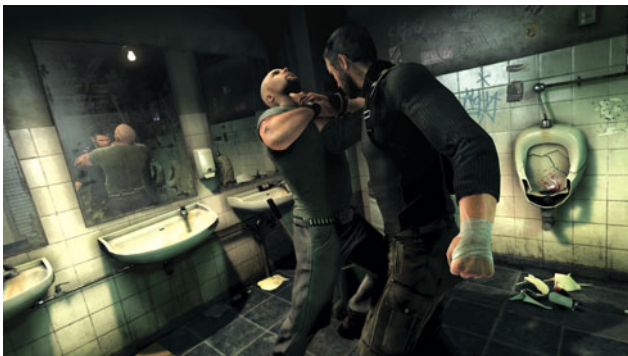
According to the game's developers, reports of the title being scrapped and restarted from scratch were never true. The team merely improved it bit by bit, searching for bold new concepts that would merit more than the "meh" that greeted the game's original hooks of stealth-in-a-crowd gameplay and environmental object interactions. (Traces of those concepts can still be found, but are far from the focus now.) Instead, Ubisoft Montreal implemented a number of flashy, original, and potentially revolutionary mechanics that bring more new ideas

"This change could easily eliminate the weakest part of every stealth game."

to this installment than the other three sequels combined.

Ubisoft Montreal seems to have joined the developers of Dead Space in attempting to drive HUD programmers and menu designers out of jobs by eliminating as many textual prompts, menus and on-screen meters as possible. The game's most eye-popping change eliminates on-screen text notifications entirely by casting backstory, mission objectives, and other pertinent information onto in-game environments as if a narrator constantly stands behind Sam with a slide projector. This trick is eye-catching, technologically impressive, and somewhat pointless, since having "INFILTRATE THE MANSION" projected onto a massive wall in a way that is apparently visible only to Sam is arguably even more ridiculous than having the words pop directly onto the screen. (It sure looks cool, though.) In addition to the projections, interactivity tags like "open door" are now subtly pasted onto the objects themselves.

Other changes are more clearly improvements. Sam no longer needs to use an on-screen light meter to tell how much protection he's deriving from the shadows; most on-screen colors desaturate into sepia tones when you're safely out of sight, while enemies and targetable objects (like a chandelier you can bring down onto your foes) glow more brightly. There's still a small on-screen display that shows your current weapon, ammo, and markers (more on that in a bit), but you no longer need to play with an eye on the corner of the screen, nor was there reason to open any of the in-



game menus during the E3 sample mission. (These menus apparently do still exist, however, for more complicated functions like inventory management.)

The series' somewhat rusty play mechanics have been given an equally drastic overhaul. When secretly viewing his targets (from shadows, through a window, or by using any sort of observational gear), Sam can now mark their positions with a targeting reticule. Eliminating those targets is then as easy as tapping a button; Sam will automatically gun down each target in the order it was marked at a speed no human player could ever hope to match. There do seem to be limitations to this ability—killing foes with the mark-and-execute functions drained little dots in the corner of the screen, and killing foes in more conventional ways seemed to replenish them.

The most welcome gameplay change was barely mentioned in the guided demo. Whenever foes spot Sam, and he manages to get out of their field of vision, he leaves a ghost image behind that marks his last known location. Sam's foes will gun for the ghost, allowing players to plan accordingly and set up an ambush by taking cover nearby or looping back to flank them. This change could easily eliminate the weakest part of every stealth game, in which spotted players must hide or flee until the enemy AI forgets about their existence. Now it'll be much easier to improvise an ambush and turn such situations around by eliminating your pursuers.

With so many powerful new abilities, it remains to be seen if Splinter Cell: Conviction can keep the tense, deliberate pacing of early titles without shifting into a faster-paced, more action-focused game. But if Conviction does herald a more action-focused direction for the series, I doubt the core mechanics of Conviction will draw many complaints—whether it's a slight curve or a hard right, Splinter Cell: Conviction seems a welcome turn for this previously staid series. [play](#)

Risen

Alone in the Dark Fantasy

words Brady Fiechter

Risen is “a world on the edge of despair.” Apparently my observation is pretty spot-on.

“Yes, yes, that’s exactly what this game is,” responds composer Kai Rosenkranz. “A great definition.”

As Rosenkranz reveals the nooks and crannies of his action RPG Risen, I get a sense of a game resting on the shadowy side of the human condition. In the areas I am shown, a blanket of mist and dusky sky strangles the sun; the creatures who come out to play appear worn and evil; the hero, a blank slate in a world of confusion, is a castaway lost as his ship dumps him onto this threatening island setting.

“This is not a high fantasy game,” explains Rosenkranz. “We’re aiming directly at dark



“You are more about your actions than your stats.”

fantasy.” Which means you won’t be seeing bright elves and chipper creatures that bring fairy goodness to the table. An element of horror suffuses the fiction, and you are in the middle of solving the mysteries of the land: murders, warring factions, underworld treachery. The ambition is to move away from a points-based RPG and provide more of an identity-driven experience, where you are more about your actions than your stats. “We want it to be mature, a feeling of being in this rough mysterious world,” says Rosenkranz.

Part of creating the illusion of an active world that possesses its own path outside your own is establishing inhabitants that go about their daily routines as if you were merely a leaf blowing in the wind. A wolf, for instance, pays you no attention if it’s already decided to kill its earlier prey and feast satisfyingly as you pass by. Or a brawl in a village may spark interest in a far-off corner as you go about your personal business. “One thing we emphasize is that this world is doing its own work,” says Rosenkranz. “We have a story to follow, but the independence of the AI and complex world systems are really important.”

Early on you are invited to join either the Bandits or the Inquisition faction and carve out a path from there, which will define your fighting style and broaden character growth. As you progress, your experience becomes currency for learning from allied teachers of the land. Crafting is a central component: mine for minerals to forge new swords, find herbs to cook up a potion. As your character grows, visual depictions reveal the transformation; a more astute warrior will begin to hold his sword more confidently in two hands as the animation frames his growth.

Risen moves through the top side of the island and into the underworld of its caves and dungeons, counterpointing natural growth with ruins and towns touched by the tools of man—often hand-crafted in a design sense, as Rosenkranz points out. “We’ve hand-made areas like placing bricks into a foundation, not by painting onto a flat wall.” Also of note, in this open world, a map is replaced by giant parts of a scattered statue that serve as a landmark to guide your journey. But more than an interesting visual reference, clues to the nature of the land lie within... [play](#)

Borderlands

A first-person, four-person looting bonanza? Where do I lay down my micro-transaction?

words Douglass C. Perry



What happens when you cross multiplayer co-op action with the ability to collect upwards of 500,000 guns? When you fuse first-person shooting with addictive World of Warcraft-style upgrades? When you cel-shade your once dark, angry Mad Max-style game? Gearbox Games is hoping you'll call it Borderlands—and love it.

Originally making its debut in fall 2007, Borderlands ushered in the new dawn of Gearbox, once known strictly for its Half-Life ports and mod-frenzied PC ways. Shown at this year's E3 2009, Borderlands' aesthetics have significantly changed. Following the fashionable portrayal of dark, angry goatee-wearing characters, the original game was just that—menacing, grim, and edgy.

But according to President Randy Pitchford, his art team secretly met and collaborated on a new design that they felt better represented the evolving feel of the game. After weeks of design changes, his team presented

Keep your eyes on the enemy!



“The design is diametrically opposed to itself, but in a strange, unexplainable way, it works.”

the new cel-shaded visage and convinced Pitchford of the new direction. The result still resonates with the grim, deserted feel of the original Mad Max movie, but more playful and, in some respects, hilarious. In short, the design is diametrically opposed to itself, but in a strange, unexplainable way, it works.

The central goal in Borderlands is to find the Vault. In your search for the Vault, a Pandora's Box supposedly filled with valuable goods/treasure/technology left behind by the ancient beings (not-surprisingly called Pandora) that once lived on the planet, you'll scour the landscape killing, looting, and doing it all over again.

Designed with a single-player campaign, multiplayer mode, and four-player co-op campaign, Borderlands enables you to jump into any mode, build up points, collect weapons, upgrade your characters, and then leave the mode you're in, take the points, guns, and upgrades with you, and join in any other mode, instantly, on the fly. So players aren't

stuck in one mode for the duration—nifty! Persistent characters make the game more appealing to gamers loaded with too many games and allows those with less time on their hands to jump in and out for shorter bursts.

Borderlands functions much like Diablo in the way you build an arsenal, and much like an RPG in the way you meet millions of seemingly random strangers offering missions. You must pick a class: blaster (guns), brick (defense), brawler (melee), and sniper (sniper!) to begin, and in our demo, we watched a Tank character build up his skill tree, earning the adrenaline rush special ability, enabling the character to dart around and madly beat enemies with his fists. Smart and funny voice acting spices up the action—enemy death screams are hilarious, created as if in a fun-house, especially the rogue enemy whose skull plates burst off and who brains flew out when electrified. We also met TK Baja, whose wife was killed and who lost a leg to “pests,” which you agree to kill them for him. The pests turn out to Skaggs, Spider-Skaggs, and “Bad-Asses,” your basic wildebeests, which like all enemies you kill, leave loot to collect, sift through, keep, or sell.

Even with dozens of decent Diablo imitations available, Borderlands aspires to reinvigorate the same mad lust for weapon collecting as the original Blizzard game through its combination of FPS action, persistent gaming, and co-op functions, hopefully giving it the lift it needs to stay above the logjam of action games coming your way this fall. [play](#)



New Super Mario Bros. Wii

Itsa mee again!

words Heather Anne Campbell



The most frustrating part of original Super Mario Bros. was waiting for the controller. If you had a friend who was really good at the game, it could take twenty or thirty minutes to get a chance to save the princess. When playing Contra as a kid, I often asked, "Why can't Super Mario Bros. be like this?" Shigeru Miyamoto wanted a simultaneous Mario experience from day one, but due to technical limitations, he found his dream deferred. Finally, with the Wii, he's able to realize the desires of his youth: co-op, competitive play. For those who can't imagine what this is like, I'll use the Contra example again. Remember the third stage, wherein you and your buddy had to scale a cliff-face together? Falling off the screen meant death, as if the world below you had become a total void. Playing like a jerk, you could race your partner to the top; rapid progression equaled partner demise. You could kill your friends just by being good at the game. New Super Mario Bros. Wii makes a game out of that idea. And it adds the ability to throw your



"This is what a party game should be."

partners into their graves.

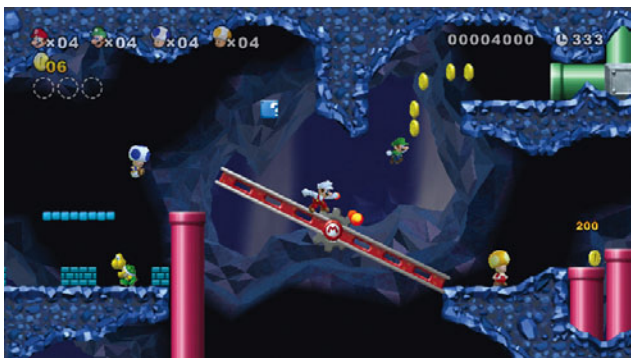
Competitive Co-op means that New Super Mario Bros. Wii is a game for the whims of the id. Need help beating a boss? Leave your partners alone. Angry that Luigi grabbed a coin you wanted? Throw him in the lava.

Now, obviously, a game like Super Mario isn't designed with this maliciousness in mind. Quite the opposite! Miyamoto recently told USA Today that the game would feature a new kind of assistance. If you and your friends are having trouble getting past a section, you can opt to have the game play itself. I'll take this opportunity to say: this is the wrong idea. This is casual gaming taken to a ridiculous extreme; the screen-saver video-game. If players are having trouble finishing a game, they don't need an auto-play button. The levels need to be redesigned. Even the lowest common denominator can rise via the step-ladder of

education—and great level design educates the player on how to progress.

Still, the things that work in the game work great. The levels feel like throwbacks to our favorite sequences from our childhoods. The power-ups are imaginative and new. Hated the Bee Suit in Galaxy? Me, too! You're going to love the Penguin Suit. Penguin Suit makes Mario waddle. Take the ridiculous Frog Suit from SMB3, with its stunted locomotion, but add an actual power-up (the ability to make ice-blocks out of enemies), and you've got a new, instantly classic piece of Mario tech. The camera zooms in and out of the experience, allowing for every player to move at their own pace. And, thankfully, the control-scheme is Wii-wand set sideways, with very limited motion control. Shake the controller to float, shake it to pick someone up. Which works, because screwing over your partners should be a little more difficult than simple, focused platforming.

This is what a party game should be. There's a point to it, a goal that shifts our intentions from competition to co-operation. That's the way to do it, Nintendo. Give us something to play! [play](#)



The Last Guardian

Team ICO returns for a Trico

words Heather Anne Campbell

Majesty. Awe. Wonder. All it takes is six screenshots, and Team Ico is already pulling on our heart strings. Meet Toriko, the haunting sidekick/protagonist of the Playstation 3 exclusive from the makers of Shadow of the Colossus and Ico. Ueda's designers return to the familiar setting of their first two titles, fusing the concepts of Yorda, Agro, and the giants of SotC into one formidable beast. Look: those are arrows, driven into its feathered fur. Don't you want to draw them out? You'll have to wait till 2010 for your chance ... [play](#)



E3 2009: NEW AND APPROVED

Thirteenth time's the charm...

words Dave Halverson

“...E3 was back in all of its pulsating glory...”

There was enough online coverage before, during and after E3 2009 to choke a giant prehistoric donkey. But I happen to like donkeys, and some of us prefer the less evasive, more selective world of print media, or a combination thereof. Considering the number of people who travel to their favorite newsstand or book emporium (or the mail box) to obtain their periodical of choice, print is the real juggernaut. Anyone can babble on the Internet but our word is our bond. As packed with amazing new games as this year's show was—and if this is E3 in a depressed economy, the meek aren't inheriting the earth, we are—I was equally delighted not to be trampled by the staff of “I faked my E3 registration.

com” trying to get a glimpse of Bayonetta's lady lumps. After two attempts at reinventing what had become a biped version of the 405 freeway, E3 was back in all of its pulsating glory, with little-to-no rubbernecking hordes, and a gift shop! I'll buy all the T-shirt superfluities they can toss my way if it means getting to my next demo without a cattle prod. Microsoft's non-hostile takeover of the Standard Hotel on E3 Eve didn't hurt either. Anyone can rent a hall; it takes an empire to convert an entire hotel into a giant gamer hive. From the swank 360 lounge in the lobby to the Rock Band Beatles party on the roof, it was all about Microsoft's games and studios. Fun and productive? Was I in the right place?

Nintendo

After going off the reservation positioning themselves as the new face of casual gaming—as if there were ever any question—it was a relief to see Nintendo acknowledge their “hardcore” roots again (can we get a word that’s not the universal call sign for porn already?). They like us; they really, really like us! Between the DS and the Wii you can now take in a book, work out, train your brain, and ... unwind. Yes, Nintendo wants to put you to sleep—but only so you’ll be wide awake to play New Super Mario Bros. Wii, Sin & Punishment 2, Super Mario Galaxy 2, Golden Sun DS, and Zelda Spirit Tracks. In Team Ninja I trust! Metroid: Other M is the perfect example of why first-person Metroid was never a good idea in the first place. Will the true 3D successor to Gunpei Yokoi’s seminal heroine please stand up? Oh look, I can see her! The last game I expected to see flying the Nintendo flag was Treasure’s Sin & Punishment 2; if there’s one game in the arsenal that says “welcome home die-hard gamers,” it’s S&P



Sin & Punishment 2

BEST on Wii

Muramasa: The Demon Blade (Ignition Entertainment)
Sin & Punishment 2
Super Mario Bros. Wii
Super Mario Galaxy 2
Final Fantasy CC The Crystal Bearers (Square Enix)
Dead Space Extraction (EA)
TMNT Smash Up (Ubisoft)
Spyborgs (Capcom)

2. Pristine Treasure action and shooting riding on Wii tech light years ahead of the curve—Treasure hasn’t lost a step. It was Ignition Entertainment’s Muramasa: The Demon Blade, however, that stole the show. Vanillaware have truly outdone themselves and Ignition has localized them accordingly. Any debate as to whether or not games are “art” or not can be put to rest (they are) and they pretty much redefine 2D control design in the process. Between Nintendo’s casual army and new Mario games and a third party arsenal that covers the demographic gamut from the bone-chilling ambience of EAs Dead Space Extraction, to the colorful fantasy world of Final Fantasy’s Crystal Bearers, the Wii has officially come into its own, across the board.

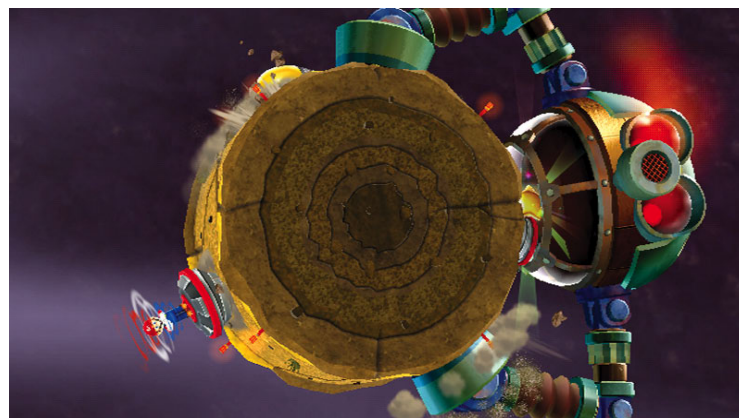


Best on DS

Golden Sun DS
Zelda Spirit Tracks
Nostalgia (Ignition Entertainment)



Zelda Spirit Tracks



Super Mario Galaxy 2



Muramasa: The Demon Blade



Dead Space Extraction



Metroid Other M

Microsoft

On the first-party front, Microsoft was travelling a little light this year with no new Rare or first-party Japanese offerings in sight, but what they lacked in quantity they made up for with quality and the strangest, coolest, scariest controller ever...you.

Have you ever found yourself sitting in a group, watching people "volunteer" to do something that looks really stupid, staring at anything other than the "guy" scanning the room for his next victim, praying he won't notice you? That was me, in the Project Natal demo. It was working like a charm too, until everyone got up to leave

BEST on XBOX360

Mass Effect 2
Halo 3 ODST
Alan Wake



Mass Effect 2



Alan Wake

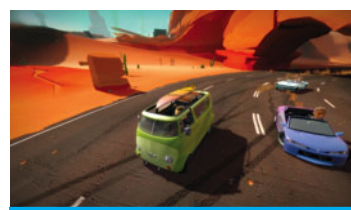


Invincible Tiger

and I went over to the "guy" (thinking I was home free) to see if maybe we were on Mind Freak or something. The next group was on deck and mine was shuffling back into the hallway, so what could go wrong? How nice of him to hold things up while I stand there and pretend drive. Remember when you were like five, making race car sounds holding onto an invisible steering wheel? Well, in 2009, that actually works. One foot forward for gas, one back for brake and you're a controller. This is no U-Force—Steven Spielberg wasn't kidding. Now go make ET 2 so I can chase Elliot around the house doing the "Phone Home" thing. Remedy was kind enough to kill the lights during the 10 minute-or so hands-on with Alan Wake, which was enough to convince me that they're about to raise the psychological thriller bar considerably and usher in a hook that's even cooler than bullet time. I don't need to tell you how cool Mass Effect 2 is; it's Mass Effect 2. I'm not touching it until it's final. No live gameplay for Crackdown 2, but the engine looks incredible. And finally, the hands-on with Halo ODST was online multi-player, the gameplay equivalent to root canal without anesthetic, but it feels like a new Halo and—that's a very good thing. Halo Reach, meanwhile "Falls 2010"



Shadow Complex



Joy Ride

"...no new Rare or first-party Japanese offerings in sight, but what they lacked in quantity they made up for with quality..."

XBLA

On the XBLA front, Chair is putting the final touches on Shadow Complex, the side-scroller every Super Metroid fan has been waiting for since cartridges went the way of the dodo. Now all I have to do is convince D. Mustard and co. to finish the Advent Rising trilogy using this engine. They still owe us two games! Shadow Complex is the biggest, baddest XBLA game so far. Only one game compares and that's Atlus' Trine; a gorgeous special effects-laden side scroller with switch-on-the-fly, heavily physics-based gameplay between a brute, archer, and a magic user. This side scrolling thing may just catch on. 'Splosion Man, Trials, Joy Ride and Invincible Tiger: The Legend of Han Tao (3D deep using w/glasses), are all absolutely requisite downloads.

BEST on XBLA

Shadow Complex (Microsoft)
Trine (Atlus)
Invincible Tiger: The Legend of Han Tao (Namco/Bandai)
Splosion Man (Twisted Pixel)
Trials (Microsoft)
Joy Ride (Microsoft)



Trine

Sony

In God of War 3, Kratos guts large mythological beasts with a heretofore unseen level of precision, but it's the painstakingly modeled and animated entrails that spill out of their bellies that tell you SCE Studios Santa Monica is doing chicken right. But if you really want to regret every time you've ever muttered "it can't get any better than this," look no

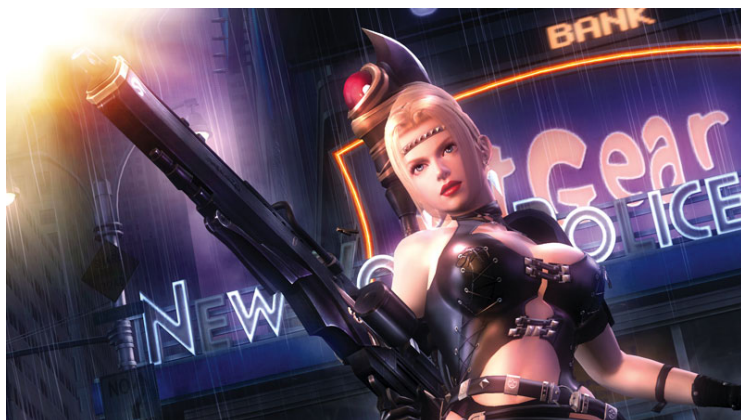
"Fresh new gameplay devices give it an especially unique feel..."



Uncharted 2: Among Thieves



God of War III



Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2

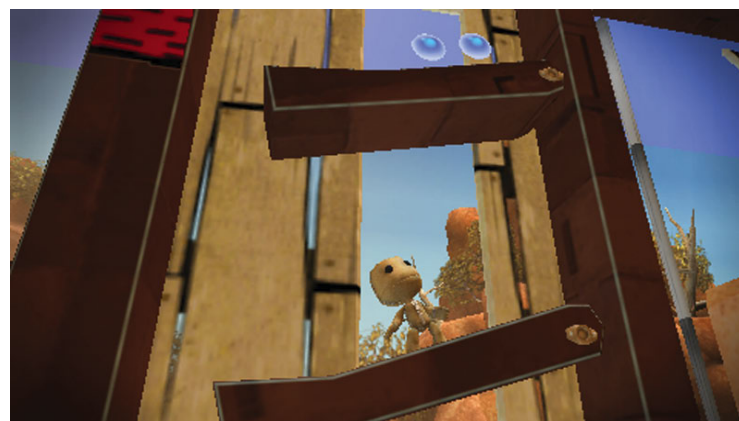


Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time

further than Naughty Dog's Uncharted 2: Among Thieves. Anyone who can look at U2 and say anything other than "I want one" about PS3 should be forced to play Superman on Nintendo 64 for the rest of their life. And don't even think Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time is just another Ratchet & Clank sequel. Fresh

BEST on PS3

Uncharted: Among Thieves
God of War III
Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2 (Tecmo)
Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time



Little Big Planet PSP

new gameplay devices give it an especially unique feel and somehow they keep making the universe look better and better. There are some crazy new design elements in play too.

In other PS3 exclusive news, speaking as a devoted disciple of Ninja Gaiden since Tecmo introduced the 8-bit cinematic, Sigma 2 is the quintessential 3D Ninja Gaiden. Whether you're hard core, a Ninja Dog, or have stayed away for fear of spearing a loved one when you shuriken your dual shock across the room, this is the Ninja Gaiden you have to have, and actually can play. It's the last of the Itagaki ilk with many touches from the new guard at Team Ninja. Ryu, Ayane, Momiji, and Rachel are all playable, and all unique, only on PS3.

Best on PSP

Motorstorm Arctic Edge
Little Big Planet PSP
Jak and Daxter: The Lost Frontier



Motorstorm Arctic Edge

Cross Platform

2009 is going to be a near impossible year to beat: Games stuffed with metal, monsters, chicks, choppers, and hot-rods starring Jack Black and the likes of Rob Halford from Judas Priest, Lemmy from Motörhead, and Ozzy circa Black Sabbath, flat don't happen. If not for the perfect storm of circumstances surrounding Tim Shafer and his Double Fine crew, EA, and whatever power in the universe brought all this together, we'd never see the likes of a *Brütal Legend*. This is one for the time capsule. The odds of laying your hands on an unbridled female lead unsullied by the rampant meddling that homogenizes anything marketing goons don't understand are also slim to none; or at least they were until now. *Bayonetta* looks, moves, acts, and plays with a level of power and grace without compare, laying waste to spectral



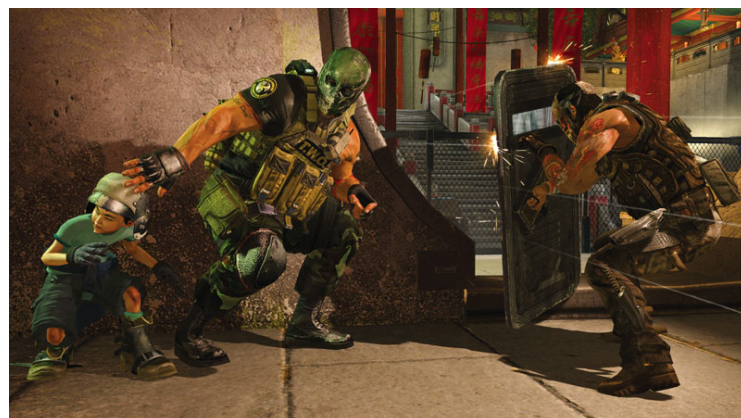
Brütal Legend



Bayonetta



Darksiders



Army of Two: The 40th Day

"2009 is going to be a near impossible year to beat..."

hordes with weapons that fire and slice from her hands and feet, and the living hair that envelopes her otherwise naked body. Left to his own devices Hideki Kamiya is the most creatively unrestrained and imaginative game designer in all of Japan, and his new Studio Platinum Games is already closing in on legendary status.

Something else strange happened at this year's E3... I'm anti-war FPS but *Modern Warfare 2* blew me away. These Infinity Ward guys are nuts. They're detailing detail! And there are adventure components. Dang! No way I can spend hours shooting real people, but I think I'll have Brady play through it while I watch! I'm not usually drawn to games like *Army of Two: The 40th Day* either, but EA Montreal are doing things with real-time staging, and both CPU and 2-player co-op that dramatically change the nature of the strain, via innovative new AI and engine tech that literally places you in the moment. *Batman: Arkham Asylum* is another pinch me situation. I had lost all hope for a *Dark Knight* game that reached into the dark mythos but *Arkham* is extraordinary and markedly original. And what can I say about *Assassin's Creed II*? *Assassin's Creed*

BEST CROSS PLATFORM

Brütal Legend Xbox360/PS3 (EA)

Bayonetta Xbox360/PS3 (Sega)

Darksiders Xbox360/PS3 (THQ)

Assassin's Creed II Xbox360/PS3

(Ubisoft)

Modern Warfare 2 Xbox360/PS3

(Activision)

Army of Two: The 40th Day

Xbox360/PS3 (EA)

Batman: Arkham Asylum Xbox360/

PS3 (Warner Bros.)

set against the Italian Renaissance with improved mission structure, stealth, and AI? See what I mean? 2009 is out of control. And finally, my zealous admiration for *Darksiders* grew even stronger at E3. Speaking to Joe Mad and various team members from *Vigil*, it's no wonder their goal of creating a modern *Zelda* meets *Castlevania*-like franchise is well at hand. *Darksiders* is stuffed with the gameplay we've grown to love and a level of character design and model integrity the likes that we have never seen. Honest, I shit you not.



Batman: Arkham Asylum

Individual Winners



Top Fighters

Tatsunoko vs. Capcom Xbox360/PS3 (Capcom)
The KOF XII Xbox360/PS3 (Ignition Entertainment)
BlazBlue Xbox360/PS3 (Aksys)



Top Racers

Need for Speed Shift Xbox 360/PS3 (EA)
Split/Second Xbox 360/PS3 (Disney)
MX ATV Reflex Xbox 360/PS3 (THQ)



Hidden Treasures

Torchlight PC (Perfect World)
Great character design (on both sides) meets great animation and meticulous polish. Runic's Torchlight is action/RPG/dungeon crawling at its finest. They're not wild about squeezing the PC interface into a controller, but we'll talk them into it!

Magna Carta II Xbox 360 (Namco/Bandai)

The art of Hyung Tae Kim comes to life on Xbox360. With Namco/Bandai at the helm, II will surely be the charm.



Most likely to laugh you into a coma

Rabbids go Home Wii (Ubisoft)

The world's first shopping action-adventure game features the world's first and only shopping cart pushing protagonists—The Rabbids of course, and some truly innovative and hilarious gameplay.

Best RPGs

White Knight Chronicles PS3 (SCEA)
Mass Effect 2 Xbox 360 (Microsoft)
Dragon Age: Origins PC/360/PS3 (EA)

Best PC Game/Best MMO

Star Wars: The Old Republic (LucasArts)

Most Original

Scribblenauts DS (Warner Bros.)

In case you haven't heard, there's a good chance that Scribblenauts uses actual magic to drop whatever pops into your mind onto the screen. Think it, write it, and see if it works. I'm thinking Stay Puft Marshmallow Man.

Best on WiiWare

Cave Story (Studio Pixel)

MIA

RARE (Hopefully they're busy making a "RARE" game)
Beyond Good & Evil 2

Biggest Surprise

Castlevania Lords of Shadow Xbox 360/PS3 (Konami)

Regarding the Iga-less new Castlevania from Madrid-based MercurySteam with Kojima Productions on board as producer, the Castlevania purist in me says *It's about time!!* This will surely be the 3D reboot we've been waiting for, but does it mean that a current-generation 2D version from Iga is out of the question? What a PERFECT fit for Wii. Paging M.Yamane...

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Dave Halverson
PUBLISHER

Modus Operandi: Play games in the genres I know and love to their conclusion and then rate them on how well, or not, they deliver relative to the system, genre, and target audience.

Brain Drain: I'm completely disgruntled with the state of movie reviews in this country. What the hell is lodged so far up these people's asses that all they can spew is crap? *Transformers 2* couldn't be a better film about *Transformers*. It couldn't be a better summer blockbuster, period. Pretentious, self-loathing hate mongers have no business reviewing movies. The web is especially toxic. 99% of the sites I go to, to gauge "popular opinion" are filled with nonsensical negativity as if they're all being forced to play games and watch films. Since most people are miserable and unhappy people tend to gravitate to the web where they can dump on happy people, it's like a massive national cesspool. When did liking anything and enjoying life become unpopular? People need to start logging back into life; this is scary. Goodnight Captain EO

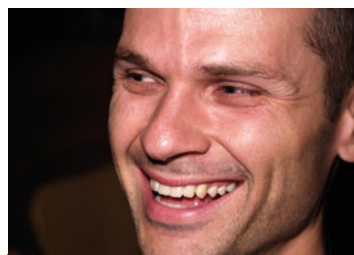
Game of the Month: Overlord 2 with a big shout out to XBLA's The Dishwasher: Dead Samurai.



Casey Loe
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I couldn't be happier that we've done away with review scores. It's ridiculous to believe that there's some objective standard of quality that covers the opinions of every person who plays games. That said, I will miss dishing out the 3.5s, because a good reaming just isn't the same without some arbitrarily low score at the end. **Brain Drain:** Not a huge fighting game fan, but I'm so tempted by the beauty of *BlazBlue* and *King of Fighters XII*. Alas, I shall probably be buying neither, because I have been repeatedly assured by my more skilled colleagues that they simply cannot be played competitively without a \$200 joystick. WTF, fighting game makers? Is there no conceivable programming technique that will make your games playable on a standard controller?

Game of the Month: Infinite Space

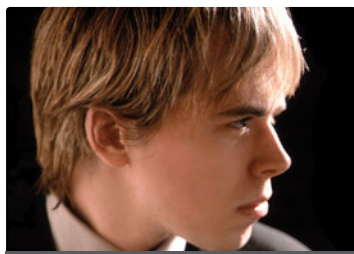


Brady Fiechter
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Modus Operandi: There is no checklist for reviewing a game. The best game feels right from the start, and the best game is not concerned with feature sets as much as how each component is handled. If the visual space is not compelling in some way, the gameplay better be so good that it's Tetris (which offers an incredibly interesting visual space).

Brain Drain: I've never been much of a handheld gamer, but something about the iPhone library has me hooked. *Peggle* is perfectly addictive for those quick down-moments I want a distraction; *Primrose* is simple elegance and appeals to my love of geometrical puzzles; *Moonlight* is actually great as simple mood piece. Buying them for a buck or two doesn't hurt!

Game of the Month: Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood



Nick Des Barres
JAPAN EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Hideo Kojima may not agree with me, but I believe video games can be art. Although I have been writing about them for 14 years, never have I felt comfortable assigning numerical scores; there exist no universal, pan-human criteria against one can judge works of art. The most a critic can aspire to is describing, with as much eloquence as he can muster, how the work in question makes him feel. That is my goal when I review a game. **Brain Drain:** I've never been an "Achievement whore", scoffing at the idea of dragging games out in an effort to lengthen my e-penis. But after a few Japan-only 2D shooters boosted my GamerScore® by 2000 points in two days, I'm going back to XBLA titles I haven't touched in years to squeeze out extra girth. Damn you, Microsoft. My valuable time should be spent playing new games!

Game of the Month: Mamoru-kun wa Norowareteshimatta!! — G.rev



Mike Griffin
PC EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I'm looking for convincing themes I can feel and considered polish I can respect, regardless of a game's scope or platform. I absolutely believe that games can be considered art, and a lot of great art requires a technical understanding of the canvas, instruments and stage. That's a balance I care about in a medium whose MO is interactivity. Interface is also very important to me... **Brain Drain:** So I was watching Jimmy Fallon play Tiger Woods in the Wii version of PGA Tour 10. Yeah, folks dig the Wii Motion Plus sensitivity, and it's another big, feature-packed EA golf game. Those last gen player models are nasty, however. Poor stilted, low-poly Tiger. I look forward to future mo-cap gaming solutions married to superior hardware: greater art and expression for this maturing motion.

Game of the Month: Aion



Heather Anne Campbell
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Games are a journey, and should be covered like travel journalism. It's more important to know how a game affects you than to provide a list of options it features on its menu screen. The number of guns, the types of vehicles, the variety of locations—these are bullet points for the back of the box. I'll tell you if it made me feel.

Brain Drain: Sometimes I wish reviews could be ongoing. Like the *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* series I'm doing on Playmagazine.com. Often, our opinions shift their shape as the material matures in our minds. For example, my opinions on *Street Fighter IV* (go figure) are stronger now than they were when I first played the game; I'd be more inclined to give the title a 10 after playing it for all these months.

Game of the Month: Trash Panic



Matt Cabral
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I can appreciate both score and score-less reviews, and believe they can absolutely coexist in our industry. I love to read—and often re-read—a well-written critique within the insightful pages of Play just as much as the next gamer. But sometimes, my Facebook-addicted, YouTube-surfing, iced coffee-swilling side craves the quick-hit satisfaction of a big fat number. Besides, have you ever tried reading a full review on an iPhone while driving? That's why playmagazine.com will host the same great review content from the magazine, with the addition of our classic 1-10 numbered scale. Plus, it gives us a voice on those sales-steering aggregate sites.

Brain Drain: I'm totally digging *Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood* and am equally stoked *Red Dead Redemption* will be galloping our way. We get, like, what, 20+ sci-fi and modern combat games a year, but a western-themed title every few? The original *CoJ* and *Red Dead* were grossly underrated. And even *GUN* was better than most of the Halo-wannabes we're endlessly subjected to. Where's my *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* game, damn it?!

Game of the Month: Prototype



Eric L. Patterson
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I come from the angle that games can always be fixed and/or improved in some way, that games should be about making the player happy, not the developer, and if a game is multiplayer, it should be online, period. I'll forgive a game's flaws if it is an enjoyable experience, but I wish the small user-centered details weren't so often overlooked.

Brain Drain: A day in the life of online console gaming. *Lost Cities* - No matches found. *sigh* *Space Invaders Extreme* - No matches found. *sigh* *Shred Nebula* - No matches found. *sigh* *GTA IV Multiplayer* - No matches found. *sigh* It breaks my heart how many great games see their online portions become ghost towns due to substandard matchmaking.

Game of the Month: Mass Effect + *BlazBlue*

Overlord 2

Places to go, people to seize



words Dave Halverson

For the uninitiated, the Overlord exists for the sole purpose of wreaking havoc (using Havoc). Travelling from village to dell and beyond, raping and pillaging in the name of evil, then using the plunder to gild his Dark Tower with swanky trappings, bolster his unholy arsenal, and pick up a bobble or two for his mistress—he's a Lord all right, but it's the elder minion Gnarl who really runs the show. Minions are too small to terrorize humanity on their own, but with 300 pounds of metal, muscle, and bad attitude on their side, they're like land piranhas.

Like the last Overlord (who apparently met a tragic end) the new Overlord commands four specific types of minion: "Browns" for basic sic-em-until-they're-dead style combat; "Reds" for ranged fire-ball attacks and breaching flammable barriers; "Greens" for stealth combat, backstabbing, and distilling poisonous barriers; and "Blues" for crossing deep water. Elemental powers aside, all minions take great joy in devouring all things cute and/or fluffy, along with people, and playing fetch, a.k.a. going ape-shit on anything the Overlord points at. Once you've retrieved a respective minions' hive and delivered it back to the Netherworld lair, they're yours for the commanding. Once summoned from their spawning pit, minions will do anything for their master, including happily (gleefully even) sacrificing their wretched little lives in your stead. But be warned, they don't reproduce as fast as reckless gameplay will kill them off, and the more minions you keep alive, the better equipped you'll be. Minions are also used as currency. Every time you forge a new weapon, the requisite number and color will leap into the molten stew like it's a pool party—now *that's* dedication. Minions are also your only allies, and when

deployed correctly, the source of much high-definition gaming joy. The Overlord is no slouch mind you. He's a HUGE powerful warrior, but he's also about as graceful as a dancing yak, so don't get too cocky out there. One-on-one he can bring down just about anything, but facing down a legion of shielded soldiers and pissy Elves, he's better served to hang back and play maestro.

As Overlord 2 gets underway, we find the recently orphaned minions combing the quaint mountain town of Nordberg in search of a new master, when they happen upon a peculiar young lad who couldn't be happier (or better suited; they don't call him "Witch Boy" for nothing) to make their evil acquaintance and light up the winter festival like a pint-sized pyromaniac. As tutorials go, trotting around the Overlord ranks right up there with the best of them. More goes on in the first ten minutes of Overlord 2 than in the entire first half of the original. Junior's on-the-job training includes burning a bevy of backside with king-size bottle rockets, manning massive catapults and hurling boulders at the adversary (along with any houses in range if you're feeling particularly evil), saddling up Browns on packs of rabid wolves, and unleashing a giant Yeti, which seems like a good idea at the time, but ends badly. You get the job anyway. Thirteen years of bad behavior training later, during which the once-middling Empire outside of Nordberg has grown into a superpower fit for a full-blown sequel, Overlord 2 is born, and a-killing you shall go.

Everything about O2 is bigger and better than its predecessors. As fun as it was, the initial formula was a slow burn, and a bit repetitious in the tactics department, which it made up for in level design and RPG elements. O2 fleshes out the lot and piles on more than I could possibly describe. Dark Towers are so five minutes ago; the new Overlord is bequeathed an entire domain, complete with its own transport and tunnel system, tied into a massive chamber hub complete with a spacious throne room (to house the many humongous thrones on offer) and sprawling bedroom level where you can order new construction, manage your spells and



alignment, and buy enough bobbles to keep the mistress happy, depending on who you select to be Mrs. Overlord. Stepping outside, the Forgery, Armory, and Minion barracks are but a floating platform ride away. Not only do your minions have their own cavern, but their own respective hives within, privy to a remodel each time you level up a color. Minions can also be viewed individually by type using the Hive Interface—and should you lose a favorite, resurrected, if the sacrifice is right. Remember how fun it was returning home from a hard day of evil, knocking around the Tower, kicking the jester and enjoying the view? Well, the jester (Quaver) now has his own chamber band that plays (horribly of course) when you draw near, providing a backdrop for his snarky limericks, and there's always something new to see provided you've stoked the fire. The richer you get, the more hours melt away.

In the field, sending out (and calling back) minions to attack a target, use a switch, fetch

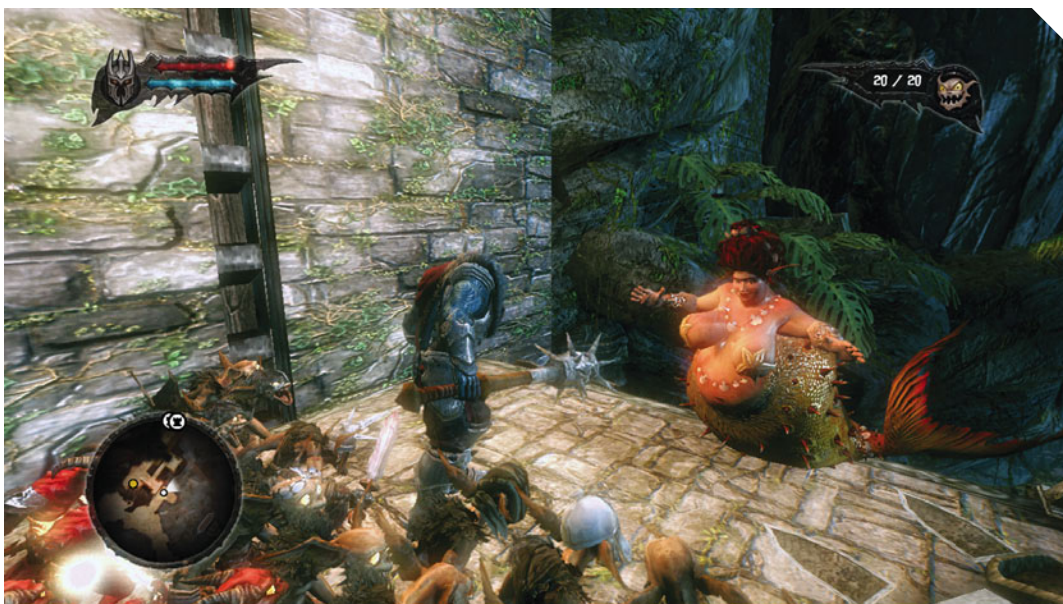
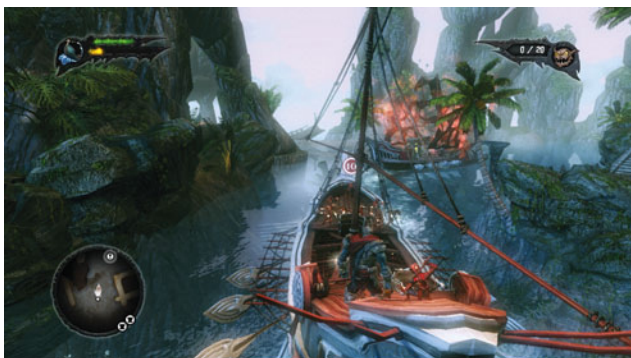


"Dark Towers are so five minutes ago; the new Overlord is bequeathed an entire domain..."



items and so forth is pretty much the same, along with the twitchy art of manually sweeping your hordes through narrow spaces. There's added nuance—the Greens have a mean backstab for instance—but if it ain't broke...add a ton of new stuff! Like riding wolves, which adds jumping to the mix, or sweeping Greens on spider-back along vertical pathways to trigger elevators, or dressing up! Send your little devils into a changing tent and they emerge legionnaires, ready to infiltrate secure areas. They're even good for a snack or makeshift projectile, although before you chow down on Slugnut there, you might want to walk a mile in its shoes (if it wore them) because now, you can! Well, you have to. Ever wonder why minions are always so damn happy whether they're skinning a baby seal or snapping a peacock's neck to wear its feathers? It's time to park your Overlord at a Netherworld

What's for dinner?
Villagers again?? Are
we out of mermaid?



“...kissing the Overlord’s buttocks isn’t just for minions anymore: why kill your victims when you can alternatively stun-and-enslave them?”

Rock and find out. Leading a complex stealth mission as a Green, or infiltrating a royal estate to gut a Governor—there’s a lot to be said about being a tiny, evil, bloodthirsty, maniacally happy little minion. If you hear of any other fairytale creature you can sweep into a crate of booze that will not only guzzle it down, but puke and pee all over the place afterwards, be sure to let me know.

The Overlord has received a bit of an overhaul himself. O2’s weapons and armor cache give you a greater range of offensive head bashing, and multiple spell types let you power up your



minions or yourself. And kissing the Overlord’s buttocks isn’t just for minions anymore: why kill your victims when you can alternatively stun-and-enslave them? The last place you might expect to see a giant man in a metal suit is on a boat, but the Overlord’s got a penchant for sailing as well. Like every other new piece of the puzzle, the sea-bearing component—which includes docking (duh), ramming, shooting, destroying, and boarding enemy frigates—is incredibly fun and a sight for otherwise gouged-out eyes, flawlessly woven into a dark fairytale universe as whimsical as it is evil, and as diverse as it is enormous, refreshing, and unpredictable. This is as close to a perfect sequel as it gets. The ingenious level design and real-time rural components that defined the original have been amplified ten-fold, along with the scale, then presented in a tighter, more diverse mélange of quests. What really sets Overlord 2 apart, though, is Triumph’s own special ingredients, their twisted minds, and an unparalleled dedication to stylization, expression, and art. O2’s in-game story integration and visual prowess is in a class by itself. The Grimm fairytale meets Monty Python universe they began with Overlord is now in full, hilarious, stride. Not only are there far more characters (friend, foe, and otherwise) but they are many times more expressive and meticulously designed. From the tree-hugging elves to the blubbery mermaids, every crazy caricature is bursting with vim and vigor. The civilians still repeat themselves, but they’re excused; zap ‘em good and they shut right up. Topped off with a mesmerizing fantasy score and a twist you have to play to appreciate, Overlord 2 is everything I hoped for piled on more than I ever expected. May you be eaten by a pack of stray Browns if you miss it. [play](#)

parting shot

Triumph Studios show the world how to produce a proper sequel. Ground-breaking visuals (for real) and tons of new gameplay; bigger worlds, more characters, more management, more tactics and more mistresses! Plus a truly inspired original score and no crap online modes!

BlazBlue: Calamity Trigger

More blaze, less dust

words Casey Loe, Nick Des Barres, and Eric L. Patterson

BlazBlue—Arc System Works' follow-up to their beloved fighting franchise Guilty Gear—is finally here, and three of play's editors got together to look at the game from three different perspectives.

Casey Loe (The Casual Combatant): After hearing that BlazBlue was a serious, technical fighter made for lunatics who spend \$500 building custom arcade sticks (**cough cough** Nick **cough** Eric), I feared it might be too much for a weaksauce, fighting-game pussy like myself. But I bought a copy 'cause I like pretty things, and ended up falling in love.

BlazBlue may be full of weird mechanics with silly names, but they're easy enough to learn, and even if you don't bother to, you can still have a blast messing around with your friends. The game is also surprisingly playable with a standard 360 pad (although you may get a few blisters if you pull an all-nighter). I'll probably never go online to get my ass kicked by the hardcore set, but I'm still having tons of fun playing through the lengthy story mode and learning each of the wildly diverse and brilliantly designed characters.

Nick Des Barres (The Fighter Fanatic): I'll admit it, BlazBlue made me feel old. Although its fundamentals are identical to the series it replaces (BB borrows predecessor Guilty Gear's strict emphasis on combos as well as all its key systems), could I hope to learn an all-new fighting game so fast-paced, so frenetic, so full of gauges at this point in my life? This isn't the amiable Street Fighter IV, a game that accommodates initiates and experts alike. BB is for the highly seasoned aficionado—even its "Drives," one-button specials ostensibly geared towards beginners, are devilishly complicated.

Thankfully, Aksys has gone to great lengths to make BB accessible, with special move shortcuts and an indispensable tutorial DVD serving to lower the entry barrier. Once everything clicks, you could not ask for a more rewarding traditional 2D fighting game experience: It's ridiculously beautiful, the fully-voiced story mode will last as long as some RPGs, and the netcode is perhaps even better than SFIV's. A game for curious neophytes this is not, but if you truly love your fighters (and are willing to invest the time it will take to learn), BlazBlue may end up being your personal Game of the Year.



Eric L. Patterson (The Arc Outsider): Alright Arc System Works—you win. After having avoided Guilty Gear for so long, you've convinced me. BlazBlue is a game where I still don't know what the hell I'm really doing half the time, but dammit if I'm not having fun doing it. Though the game is a million miles away from my SNK-nurtured comfort zone, the uniqueness of each character and how their personal styles can totally change gameplay is something that comes together for a rather awesome experience. I am also utterly baffled by how much love and effort Arc put into this project—the game's digital comic-esque story mode is ridiculously spectacular, and marks probably the first time in the history of 2D fighters that I've cared about a single-player mode. If you, like me, never thought BlazBlue would be your bag, I encourage you to rethink that position. [play](#)

Taokaka (below) makes catgirls cool again



parting shot

Casey: Don't be daunted, casuals. This is for you, too!
Nick: Difficult to learn, difficult to master, but deeply rewarding.

Eric: Casual, hardcore... I'm just here for the loli vampire princess.



Call of Juarez

Bound in Blood

Go West, Young Men

words Brady Fiechter

In a game about war, blood, guns, and obsession, it's the few quiet moments that really stick. I recall the downtime in a small outpost outside the remains of a wild shootout, where I took a stroll down a dusty path suffocating in the dry heat of the setting sun. After admiring the amazing portrait of mountain and canyon, I stocked up on supplies and bought a new six shooter, which proved immensely satisfying as I unloaded a test round into the endless sky.

It was time to move on, use that gun to mow down whatever wave of cowboys and Indians were waiting to get in the way of finding the treasure of Juarez. This is a first-person shooter first, a tale of brothers out for revenge and a new lease on lives lost to the Civil War second. The big ambition of rearing storytelling and game mechanics as one will annoy some purist gamers—the game halts constantly and sometimes abruptly to dwell on a cut scene—and delight others looking for the idea of a game as movie. It is the theme of Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood that ultimately gives it potent bite. If you find the mood and setting of the Western richly appealing, then here you go: Bound in Blood is a visual stunner, establishing spectacular spaces inspired by the time that are as fun to move



“It is the theme of Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood that ultimately gives it potent bite.”



through as they are to admire. It's been a long time since a game delighted me this much with the call of its setting.

I emphasize the invaluable pull of the game's world, because the average to above average shooting gallery that takes place inside it will break down to the more discriminating gamer looking for top-tier gameplay. The action shines in closer quarters, but gets especially rough around the edges in the more expansive moments that show the kinks in the AI. The construct of the levels and the architectural engagement positions the enemies for more of a pop-up mode of firefights—a strength and a weakness. Pulled from the enjoyment of the setting, the ornate guns are a blast to use, highlighted with speedy discharges of a quick-shooter coupled with the satisfaction of the kill with a succession of blink-of-an-eye head shots. While mostly a straight-ahead shooting affair that sticks to the FPS template, the thematic elements open up some clever breaks in the all-out war moments with one-on-one showdowns, asking you to position your character in the face of your enemy and wait for a bell toll before drawing a weapon. It serves the narrative nicely, and doubles as a satisfying and reflexive straight gameplay device.

One of the slight hooks that's been pushed for Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood is the choice to pick either brother Ray or Thomas after each chapter break, but while they do vary somewhat in their style, their presence more frames the story as an emotional device, ending up a throwaway interactive option. Having to deal with another character sometimes getting in your way and disengaging the sense of immersion while he makes choices you balk at is typical and a little frustrating at times. But I like the interplay the brothers offer, heightened by baby brother William's religious convictions that spin the tale in unexpected directions; the tradeoff for clunky gameplay works.

It's diverting to get caught up in the mentality

that innovative ideas define a good game on face value, dismissing age-old, well-packaged components. Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood started up on a downer note: here we are, in the midst of a civil war battle, moving through a trench while chaos floods the surroundings. Large scale moments don't showcase this game at its best, and another limp been-there-done that march just left me cold. Further down the line, you start to feel the emotion of the land, coming into a scene where a same-old-same-old FPS turret scene somehow becomes one of the more affecting stretches in the game: a chase scene in a fleeing wagon puts you behind the sights of a Gatling gun, as a group of horseback Comanches pursue with a rain of arrows. It felt quite uncomfortable dropping a horse to the ground, forcing me to be more accurate and aim for the human rider instead. Pleasingly, I felt something here—I left the scene with a different kind of rush, and it was great.

But of course, it was easy as shooting fish in a barrel to drop the Indian pursuers, as it always is in a video game, never asking you to give contextual thought to your actions. Call of Juarez, despite some noble intentions at drawing out a story with some real meat and conviction, is ultimately a spirited, well crafted, even a little surprising wild west shootout in a magnificent setting. I craved an experience like this and walked away impressed with a game that might not be one of the best games of the year, but will surely be one of my favorite games of the year. [play](#)

parting shot

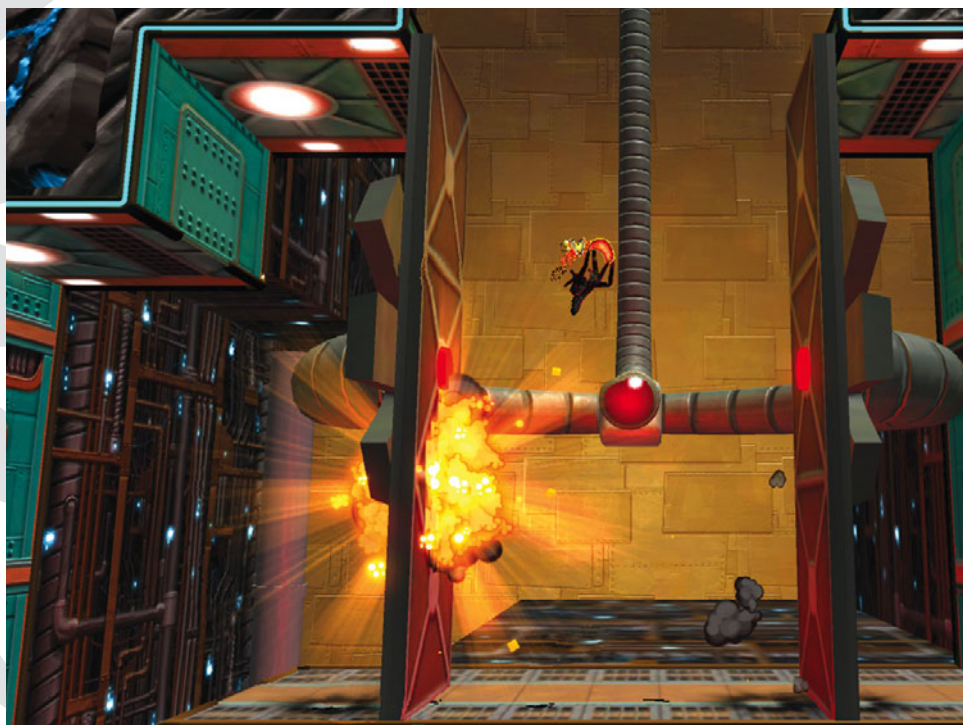
Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood is a thematic triumph that makes you look past the gameplay lumps. Come for the Western fantasy, revel in the visual presentation and get a decent shot of first-person action in between.

'Splosion Man

You'll get a bang out of it!

words Dave Halverson

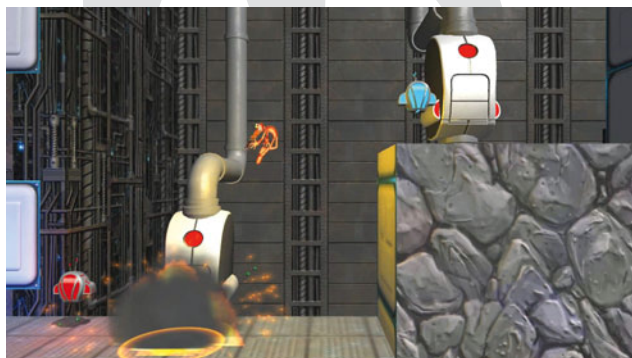
It still amazes me that I can open a menu and within minutes be playing a game like 'Splosion Man for around 10 bucks. I remember being at my local Toys 'R' Us before they opened the day after *Zelda II* came out, and finally getting home around 11 (P.M.) after finally driving 100 miles to procure the shiny gold box. What amazes me even more though is that 20 years later—wow, that's insane, by the way—Twisted Pixel has managed to bring innovation to the 2D platformer...not a hook, but a single play mechanic that redefines the art of



“Twisted Pixel has managed to bring innovation to the 2D platformer...”

jumping in a genre that's been prevalent since the dawn of gaming. Not bad for their second XBLA game, eh? Supplanting jumping and deflecting with a localized burst adds an entirely new dimension to the art of platforming. Goodbye jump, hello 'Splode! Each time you press the (jump) button, 'Splosion Man discharges a small localized burst that extinguishes 1/3rd of his body mass as it sends him on his trajectory path; giving essentially an explosive triple jump.

Twisted Pixel take this simple exhilarating new way to pop into the air and weave it into one of the most ingenious and altogether infectious twitch side-scrollers I've played since the original *Sonic*. But pack your skills; 'Splosion Man is no walk in the Green Hill Zone. Who 'Splosion Man is, is a bit of a mystery. All we really know is that he's on the loose and highly lethal, especially to the scientists working feverishly to put their genie back in the bottle. More than anything he seems



You've got what
for me? Missiles?
No thanks.

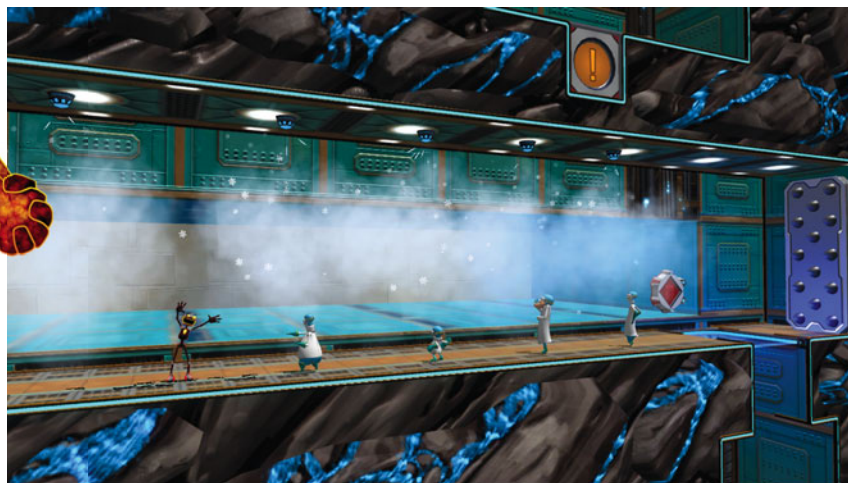
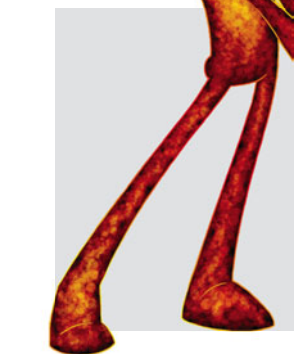


to be enjoying his freedom immensely. He's not "bad" that's for sure, in fact, something tells me he's got no idea that incinerating his keepers is anything more than a funny little game resulting in a meat shower. Each area is divided into 15-17 bite-size, 5-10 minute segments depending on the degree of difficulty between the action and puzzle elements. As the scientists scurry for switches to keep 'Splosion Man contained, your job is to either 'Splode 'em before they get there or maneuver your way to their location and light 'em up.; 'Sploding off walls, across moving platforms (TP go nuts with platforms) and launching from 'Splode Barrels. Splode Barrels (dispensed by passing in front of a switch) launch 'Splosion Man like a radioactive missile, although the dispensers are usually situated in such a way that you have to anticipate their decent and time it so you can meet and 'Splode off of them in mid air, often times chaining together several types. There's ample time to dial in the cadence before the major timing/'Sploding chains come into play, but once they do, they only get longer and more complex as you guide

'Splosion Man' to freedom. Should you find yourself stuck or stumped in a particular section however, choosing "The Way of the Coward" will boot you to the end of the section; no harm, no foul—'cept maybe a little bruised ego. Beats spiking a perfectly good 360 controller though. If you live for this stuff like I do, 'Splosion Man is cause for much celebration. Poppin' off 'Sploding combos at



ballistic speed, anticipating the next obstacle or switch and linking maneuvers makes you feel like a mad gamer all over again, and the co-op is, unbelievably, as good as the single-player, provided you cooperate with someone at or above your skill level. The single-player and co-op level design are completely unique to one another. There are more enemies 'Sploding solo, all of which are tuned to the max and wonderfully devised; but Dual 'Sploding and 'Splode Tossing in unison are what co-op is all about. Rather than just throw you into the same situation, TP create scenarios where you either work together or in sync, chain 'Sploding up either side of the screen and often crossing paths, 'Sploding off of each other in mid-air. It takes a bit of getting used to—it's entirely original—but once you dial it in, it's illegally fun. The more familiar you become with TP's signature style the better and bolder you become; and you won't believe the stuff they throw your way. They also understand that with great pattern-based 'Sploding sequences comes great responsibility; checkpoints are generously distributed throughout each maze and loading is non-existent. As great as 'Splosion Man's gameplay is—and it's polished to a blinding sheen—Twisted Pixel's vivid, playful, characters and rich, highly-detailed environments really drive it all home. Joshua Mosley's perky single-player soundtrack does its part too. It's perfectly pitched to the madcap flow of the game and its peculiar leading maniac. Let's not forget those bosses either, one of which is on this very page. When was the last time you did battle against anything that big that actually made you laugh? Conker Live & Reloaded comes to mind. Too bad you have to send him to his doom—a scene that tops most games' ending sequences, and you're just getting started. [More](#)



parting shot

Twisted Pixel make the most of their ingenious hook by gradually building the game around it for the duration, so there's always something new to see and 'Splode. A wider variety of backgrounds would be nice, but the gear-works within them change and evolve at a rate that makes the sameness fade away. Gameplay this pure, this tuned, and this fun is rare indeed, and the 'S-Man himself is a total blast.



Brave

A Warrior's Tale

A Brave new world

words Dave Halverson

Brave: A Warrior's Tale is virtually devoid of any contemporary "call to action" marketing rigmarole; there's nary a household name to tout between the titular character, developer and publisher; no big gameplay innovation or concept to speak of; no tangible violence; no celebrity voiceovers; no online bells and whistles; and the base gameplay and technology are strictly last-generation. In other words, it's got my name written all over it. Contemporary marketing hooks usually contain high levels of superfluous; big names often suck up money better spent on development; innovation and shiny technology don't guarantee great gameplay; and as far as I'm concerned, the last generation was one of the best.

Sure, I love it when a good epic comes together as much as the next guy, but I'm also the first in line whenever a budding developer or publisher is willing to buck the trend and put



out a bargain-price game based on gameplay and presentation alone that's so utterly locked onto its target demographic they might as well be walking around with bull's-eyes painted on their foreheads. Namely, remnants of an era that began on September 26, 1996 with Super Mario 64, that started to slowly decline in 2002 until finally being put on life support in 2005. Currently, it's still touch 'n' go, although the patient is stable and the prognosis...well, you tell me. Are you out there? And if you are, where the heck were you in April 2005? You call yourself a Psychonaut!?

Not that Brave is going to rekindle platforming; there's A Crack in Time coming to do that...

Brave: A Warrior's Tale is a port of the 2005 PS2 game (Brave: The Search for Spirit Dancer) in which an elder Brave, now a Tribal leader, recounts his great adventure to a promising young brave boy (or girl, the choice is yours) named Courage; yours to control in a slapdash playable prologue and finale that do little more than make you wish VIS Entertainment did the

port. The core game holds up surprisingly well otherwise, albeit much more so on Xbox 360 than Wii. Outmoded geometry has a tendency to develop fresh warts porting up, but Brave gets a clean bill of health. The textures and models look markedly better on 360, as do the effects, and the gameplay is as taut and reflex-oriented as ever. The Wii doesn't fare nearly as well—muddy textures, sloppy collision, texture draw, jaggies... Porting from PS2 to Wii is never pretty, but the Wii is flush with twitch gaming. The 360 needs a platformer, even if it is five years young.

If you ask me (they didn't), Southpeak would have been better served bringing the original game closer to 360 specs. The overall design and gameplay certainly warrant it, and there's a lot to like about the way VIS Entertainment presents their Native American theme.

Don't let Brave's big anime eyes and huggable demeanor fool you—there's a big, well-devised game built around him that goes the extra mile to ring true to his roots. What A





“VIS managed to give Brave a majestic Native American feel congruous to a stylized platforming world...”



It wouldn't be Native American without burial grounds.

Warrior's Tale lacks in modern sheen, it more than makes up in scope and originality.

Thrust into an unforeseen destiny with no prior combat or survival training, Brave pulls his first weapon, a simple stick, out of the ground before making his way to a nearby cave where his spirit guide Gray Bear teaches him how to read cave drawings and make a fire to light the stick—not your typical Dick and Jane preamble. From there, young Brave will learn how to call and mimic

animals to adopt their skills and later possess their bodies; he'll master the long bow and tomahawk; ride on the back of a giant eagle; befriend a sasquatch; climb sheer cliffs; learn to track; ride wild buffalo; canoe down raging rivers; and master shamanist magic. Quite a bit of adventure for an action-platform game, but not to worry—in the jumping department, it doesn't get any more traditional than this. The Spirit World is like a Mecca for floating, gliding, crumbling, and disappearing



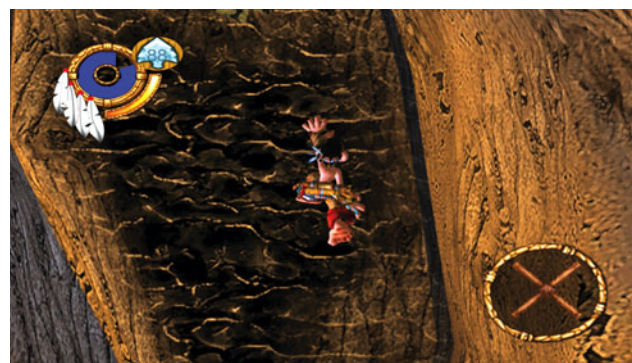
platforms, and the combat rarely lets up.

The entire Tale has an air of immensity that makes it seem like much more than the sum of its parts. VIS managed to give Brave a majestic Native American feel congruous to a stylized platforming world, and cover the gamut of Western-flavored backdrops in the process. For a 30-dollar game, Brave travels a lot of ground. Lush forests, desert plains, misty caves and burial grounds, mountain ranges, thick snow, giant caverns and waterfalls, sun-drenched canyons, raging rivers...if it's part of Native American culture and mysticism, it's in here, accompanied by a soundtrack that fuses the steady beats of traditional Native American music, heavy on flute, drums and rattles, with contemporary video game overtones. Pass the peyote, ceremonial sonnets in effect.

Not to say that Brave is some life-changing game you can't live without. It rides on dated tech, devoid of the effects we've come to expect from our 360's such as bump mapping, dynamic water, realistic cloth, fur, fire and so on. The larger creature models hearken back to chunky Tomb Raider bears; the camera has a habit of jamming up in tight spaces and the added gameplay, however brief, should be waaay better. But the many highs far outweigh the lows. It's not like you have a stack of fun, original six-hour long Native American-tinged platformers in your closet, let alone featuring anything close to a highly animated, squat, hyper expressive, tomahawk wielding little Brave caricature with a Ghouls 'n' Ghosts double-jump, a head full of manga eyes, and hands and feet bigger than his torso. There's your 30 bucks worth right there. [play](#)

parting shot

Whether you live to jump or not, if you can stifle your inner graphics goblin long enough to get a sense of what Brave has to offer, you might be surprised at just how engaging a well-polished PS2 port can be on 360. If only there could have been a 360 or PS3 version, Brave might have soared considerably higher.





Prototype

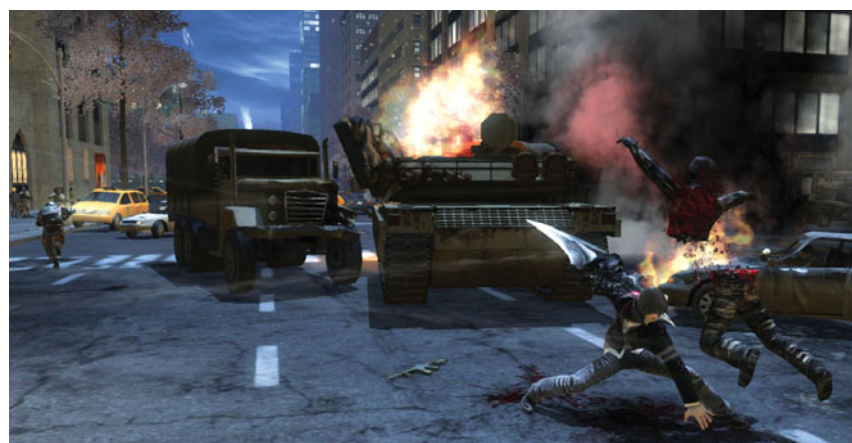
With great power comes...ah, screw it!

words Matt Cabral

If Peter Parker said "F**k power and responsibility—I just wanna tear shit up!" he'd be a lot like Prototype's antihero-in-a-hoodie Alex Mercer. You see, the shape-shifting star of Radical Entertainment's (Hulk: Ultimate Destruction) outrageously gory open-world actioner has superpowers, but he's also super pissed, and deciding which moral path to take would only get in the way of his violence-fueled quest for revenge and answers.

It might sound challenging to get behind a character who'd turn his own grandmother into a pulpy puddle of flesh and blood, but it's actually quite liberating—it allows you to indulge your inner-evil and experiment with Prototype's way-over-the-top slate of corpse-carving abilities without worrying about whether or not you'll free a

A game all about destruction.



few innocent bystanders of their intestines. Alex's fists can morph into a variety of life-siphoning tools—hammers, whips, blades, claws—and the game's at its absolute best when you're using these abilities without restraint to tear the city a new one.

Whether you're pounding a piece of military hardware into the pavement, pulling a chopper from the sky, or just cutting a blood-soaked swath through a crowd of infected crazies, letting the leash off Alex's powers is a blast. Exploring the city with his traversal abilities is also rewarding; scaling skyscrapers, gliding over the cityscape, and hurtling down the streets of Prototype's take on the Big Apple is just as satisfying as chucking a taxi cab into a helicopter. And, when you're not turning baddies into baby food, or using the city as your own personal jungle gym, Prototype allows you to "consume" targets. This neat little trick sees you taking the form of another person—as they disappear into a thick mist of crimson plasma—giving you access to their abilities and memories. In fact, you'll discover some of the more interesting aspects of Prototype's plot this way. Just playing through, and not consuming the minds of most of the 120+ info-carrying targets, will likely leave you disappointed in the story. Feeding on folks, though, will not only piece together a more cohesive narrative, but also grant you experience points to upgrade Alex's arsenal.

While Prototype does a few things very well, it lacks the polish we've come to expect from current-gen titles. Alex's powers and the gore-filled kills they

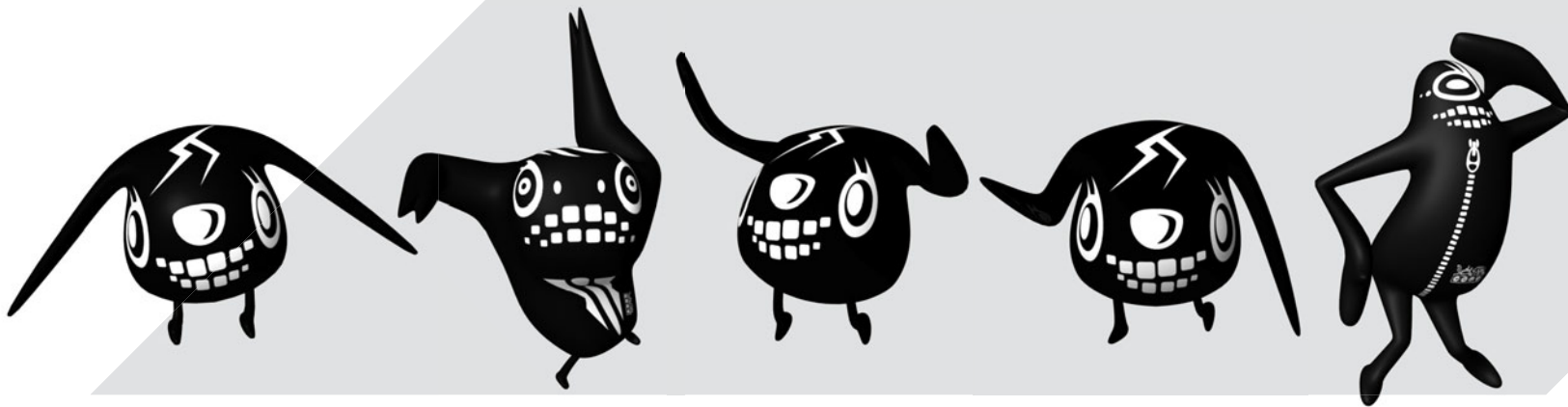
yield offer some stunning visual treats, but simpler things sadly don't receive the same attention to detail. NPC, vehicle, and building models are too frequently repeated, the AI often behave as though they weren't programmed to do anything at all and, next to Liberty City, Prototype's metropolis looks like a blocky Hollywood back lot. Additionally, the game wasn't done any favors by arriving so soon after Sucker Punch's superior inFAMOUS, a title offering equally engaging gameplay, but also polished to near perfection in every other aspect of its design.

Still, when it comes to halving infected beasties at the torso, splattering a chopper's cockpit glass with its pilots' brains, and impaling a crowd of civilians by conjuring spikes from the pavement, few titles satisfy like this one. Also, if you look for it—and you'll have to—there's a pretty good story hiding under all the gore. If you're the type who always follows the path of "evil" in titles that straddle moral ambiguity, you'll love donning the hood of Prototype's bad boy. [play](#)

parting shot

Although it lacks much of the polish we've come to expect from sandbox style titles such as GTAIV and inFAMOUS, navigating Prototype's world—while leaving a chunky bloodbath in your wake—as the remorseless Mercer packs more than its fair share of guilty-pleasure thrills.





Trash Panic

Tetris as designed by The Incredible Hulk

words Heather Anne Campbell

Do yourself a favor and go buy Trash Panic. It sets you back five bucks, and is *much* more satisfying than a meal at McDonald's or whatever else you're spending your Lincolns on. For the price of a Grande Mocha, or a loaf of premium Gold Oats bread, you get the best little weird puzzle/novelty/physics game you've played in the last few months.

I'm like you. I do not like puzzle games. I'd rather be, I don't know, fighting against space aliens, throwing fireballs, gutting Nazis, or driving cars I'll never be able to afford to locations I've only seen from passenger planes. Puzzle games are for my mom.

That is, except Trash Panic. Trash Panic is to puzzle games what Burnout's crash courses

These six people want your five bucks.



"Trash Panic is the psychopath's puzzle game, a title designed for the impatient and tempestuous."

are to racers. Perhaps you recall the times you've played Tetris, and thought to yourself, «God, if I could only smash these stupid bricks against each other, this game would be more fun.» That's what Trash Panic is. Each of the objects is a real-world item, like a broom or a piggy bank (or in later levels, buildings and oil rigs and comets). Your job is to fill a nearly two-dimensional trash bin with these objects, breaking them against each other to conserve space. Sometimes, you set the litter on fire. Other times, when your bin is filling with water, you can add decomposition elements to break down the debris. When your bin is getting too unmanageable, you can shake the controller to try and settle the trash. Additionally, there are pieces of trash that should not be destroyed, which have to be set near the bottom of the can to be rescued by the strange trash-obsessed side-kicks that monitor your progress.

Players score points based on how much damage they do to the planet (burning trash releases toxic gas, etc), against how clean their bin is, and how much fancy trash they've rescued.

It's hard to convey the glee of the game without conjuring images of ho-hum spacial organization and brightly colored blocks. But Trash Panic is the psychopath's puzzle game, a title designed for the impatient and tempestuous. For me, throwing a cell-phone against an old

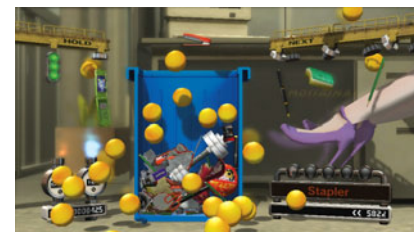
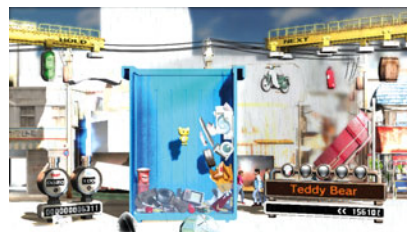
computer is far more satisfying than snuggling two abstract shapes into a locked position. It's why I was terrible at math and great at physics; I needed a tangible concept to make the problems interesting. The old, *two-trains-are-headed-in-opposite-directions* question was more enticing than a straight-up conceptual formula. And what's better, Trash Panic suggests that those trains are headed *at* each other, and you've got to figure out how best to make them collide.

Outside of the main levels, there is a Mission Mode with specific objectives (like Ring The Bell, in which an iron bell must be struck 108 times). There's a versus mode, with two cans and in-house competitive play, but sadly these matches are far too short to build momentum. There's an Unlimited Mode (you guessed it: limitless trash), Trophies, and a YouTube feature that lets players share their best rounds of Panic. And the whole thing includes a lengthy, highly recommended instruction manual.

A game with this much to give for such a small price puts a lot of other titles in a different perspective. If five bucks gets me all this game, then perhaps the trash is truly elsewhere. [play](#)

parting shot

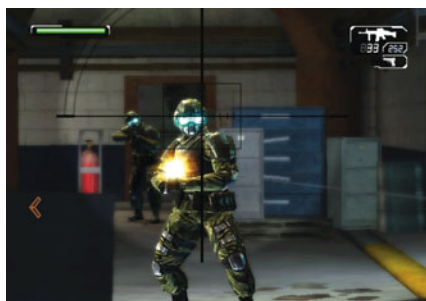
Get it. It's fun, it's cheap, and it's delightful.



The Conduit

This is your Wii on High Voltage

words Dave Halverson



Over the past decade as first-person shooters have gradually evolved into first-person action-adventures, I've gone from FPS hater to first-person action-adventure true believer. The farther away from frag-fests like Unreal and Quake and the closer to action adventures like The Chronicles of Riddick and Halo the genre drifts, the better it gets. The FPS as we knew it is fast becoming a blip on the features list on the backs of boxes containing games like The Conduit.

Not that I go out of my way to pump lead into every new space marine or alien species that comes down the pike. The genre is still limited in scope and impervious to change. How driving, carrying an item, or vertically ascending a ladder with no visible hands or feet can be construed as anything but a glitch I still can't comprehend. It's not always a deal breaker though. Take The Conduit for instance; it's ladder-free, features a proper jump (another seemingly unattainable achievement in the great first-person canon bites the dust), and the point of view originates a few feet in front of protagonist Michael Ford, who's too busy facing down marauding alien bugs and shadowy government organizations to care whether I can see his feet or not.

The way I see it, if you're going to remove the "person" from a game, you had better nail the flying torso physics and fill the now wide-open screen with some serious next-level bells and

whistles, placing the odds on an effects-laden first-person adventure emerging on the Wii somewhere between slim and never. Or so I believed until High Voltage showed me some of their Wii tech a couple years back at GDC. Granted it set my expectations sky high, but better soaring than none at all. Aside from a single-level demo I played last year and immediately erased from my memory when I learned how early it was, I hadn't seen or played The Conduit since when I fed the ROM into my trusty Wii debug (pun absolutely intended).

At first glance, even though the initial set pieces are completely plausible—including the the Ronald Reagan Airport, sorry Dutch—you know there's something special going on inside your Wii. It's not visual fidelity on par with your Xbox 360 or PS3, though—that would be impossible in 480p. It's your Wii on High Voltage Software's performance enhancing engine. Imagine your Wii as a wet towel. Now imagine The Incredible Hulk wringing it out. There you have it. Had they merely aped the more expensive consoles' tech, The Conduit would

look like a façade. Instead, we get a game with a distinct next-generation look and feel all its own. From a few feet away certain surfaces appear flat, when up close they're bathed in a realistic bump map. Elsewhere, effects like dynamic water, color gloss maps, depth of field, traditional bump mapping, and the projected texture lighting that emanates from the All Seeing Eye jump off the screen as if to say "how do you like Wii now!?"

Wii-busting visuals aside, The Conduit has all the characteristics of a budding franchise and some of the best control I've ever experienced in the first-person. Granted the Wiimote and

"Imagine your Wii as a wet towel. Now imagine The Incredible Hulk wringing it out."



Michael Ford brings you a different sort of Drudge report.



Nunchuck combo is tailor made for it, but the credit really belongs to the architect, which in this case happens to be...you! Well, you using High Voltage's interface. Every aspect of the control is user defined. Not as in the ability to reverse axis or sensitivity but as in: HUD placement and transparency, running speed, reload blur, sensitivity in every direction, mapping features, camera style, remote dead zone, rumble, auto-center, and the all-important ability to turn when the cursor goes off screen. Turn this on immediately if you want to keep turning when your cursor goes beyond the right or left edge of the screen...or not. Have it your way. In a nutshell, the only way to rag on control in *The Conduit* is by looking in a mirror.

The base structure otherwise is straightforward in-your-face first-person action and sci-fi adventure with shades of *Independence Day*, *Aliens*, *National Treasure*, *Patriot Games*, and *Starship Troopers*. Not to say *The Conduit* isn't original. You can't make one of these without brushing up against Hollywood. High Voltage wisely plays it close to the vest, delivering a taut cohesive progression of levels that intensify in league with the narrative. It's sci-fi to the core but the gameplay is closer to *GoldenEye* than *Halo*, with clean dossier style menus and methodical play mechanics over straight-ahead run 'n' gun.

You assume the role of Trust Agent Michael Ford, whose unparalleled loyalty and resourcefulness has landed him in the middle of alien invasion wrapped in government conspiracy, fending off fellow agents infected with an alien virus that's turned them into "kill Michael Ford" puppets and *The Drudge*, an aggressive alien menace of varying size,



intelligence, and toughness. Agents are fairly easy pickings (depending on the difficulty), but *The Drudge* require an increasingly more tactical approach that's as much about the environment and weaponry at your disposal (between conventional and *Drudge* guns and grenades) as it is the respective onslaughts tactics. Together with staging and AI that emphasizes mayhem and unpredictability over traditional patterns, the resulting give and take is excellent. The setting plays a big role too. I don't know how authentic they are, but shooting your way through the White House, Pentagon, and other DC landmarks you've been staring at all your life while eerie live radio broadcasts describe pockets of chaos, definitely puts you in the moment. I also really, (really!) appreciate being alone for the duration. Team warfare's just not for me; too many distractions. The one thing that really drives *The Conduit* home for me, however, is the ASE (All Seeing Eye), a handy little piece of *Drudge* technology that locates hidden weapon caches, opens hidden bio-locks, destroys ghost mines, solves ASE puzzles, reveals giant aliens that



want to kill you, and screams originality...and something tells me HVS are just getting started.

Complaints? If I have one, it's that as robust and replayable as *The Conduit* is, it could be even more so if the resources allotted to online components was focused on the single-player campaign. I know (at least I hear) it's required, and if it sells more copies of the game I'm all for it but you don't see traditional FPSs adding online single-player stages for my benefit. Why can't online people buy online games and single-player people buy single-player games? I guess I'm anti-dilution. Any way you slice it, squish it, and otherwise drive it back from whence it came, *The Conduit* is a triumph. [HVS](#)

parting shot

The seminal Wii FPA has arrived, loaded with top-fuel Wii tech, consistent, persistent, decidedly well-designed and executed gameplay, an excellent soundtrack, and enough originality to separate it from the first-person pack.

preview

System: DS Developer: Nude Maker/Platinum Games Publisher: Sega Available: Spring 2010

+interview

Infinite Space

And beyond...

words Casey Loe

Infinite Space had “cult hit, commercial failure” written all over it—it’s a brutally hardcore game made for Japan’s most casual platform, facing a marketplace that had turned downright hostile towards non-franchise RPGs. But after a surprisingly strong first day of sales, Japan’s message boards lit up with rave reviews. Within three days of release, the game had almost completely sold out—we had to visit seven stores before we found a single overlooked copy for sale. Infinite Space had emerged as the year’s first non-franchise word-of-mouth hit, and as he sat down for our interview, Director Hifumi Kouno was glowing, if a little exhausted, over its unexpected success.

Kouno is the director, writer, and designer

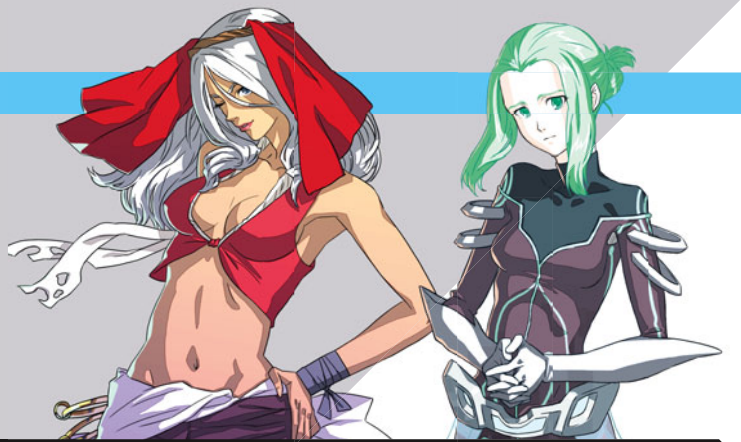
of Infinite Space, as well as the CEO of the tiny nine-man development group Nude Maker. Nude Maker’s last console release was the Capcom-published Xbox mech game *Steel Battalion*, which famously came with a two-stick, 40-button controller and retailed for \$200. In fact, Kouno’s love for unconventional game controllers popped up again in an early phase of Infinite Space development; he was toying with the idea of a special controller shaped like a helmsman’s wheel from an old-fashioned ship. (This was before the decision was made to make the game on the DS instead of consoles, of course.)

Since *Steel Battalion*, Nude Maker has been living up to their name by making—yes—porn games. But nothing they’ve made has been as explicit as the hot, throbbing stat porn in Infinite Space. Though it has a conventional character-driven storyline, its real passion lies in its miles-deep layers of freedom and customization. You can build over a hundred different ships, customize them with interior modules and external weapons, and assign crew to positions ranging from first mate to ship’s cook to doctor’s assistant. And your crewmen aren’t randomly generated, faceless drones, but unique characters with their own backstories who you’ll meet one by one on a quest that will take you through multiple galaxies.

“I [realized] the graphics on DS might be limited, but I could do whatever I wanted in terms of story.”



Not your typical DS experience...



INTERVIEW

A conversation with:
Nude Maker's Hifumi Kouno, director
Platinum Games's Atsushi Inaba, producer, *Infinite Space*



Interview by Casey Loe and Nick Des Barres / Transcribed by Dai Kohama / Translated by Nick Des Barres

play: Please give us your quick pitch for *Infinite Space*, for our readers who may not be familiar with it.

Hifumi Kouno: "Command your own Starship Enterprise," I suppose. Not that our ships are very Enterprise-like (laughs). You might say it's a game where you play as Han Solo instead of Luke Skywalker—you have your own Millennium Falcon. It gets bigger and bigger, until eventually you're in command of, like, a Star Destroyer. In terms of the theme...the reason there are so many story branches is because I want the experience of the journey *itself* to offer just as much freedom as the shipbuilding. We really concentrated on that. So, "Your very own space opera" might be another good way to put it.

Infinite Space is about as hardcore as games get. Why was the DS chosen?

Atsushi Inaba: It was a question of money (laughs). No, I'm kidding. I asked that *Infinite Space* be made on DS. When Mr. Kouno and his team put together the original design doc, they weren't thinking of any particular hardware—only the type of game they wanted to make. Developing *Infinite Space* for PS3 or 360 would have been a massive-scale effort, so I felt that if we really wanted to see this project through, a handheld was more realistic. PSP was another possibility, but only an extremely limited range of software sells on that platform...I knew it would be difficult for an original game like this to make an impact. Considering all these things, I asked Mr. Kouno if he would produce the game for DS. HK: I agreed, knowing that the graphics on DS might be limited, but I could do whatever I wanted in terms of story. For example, the average story-based game on a home console might go to here (Kouno draws a line a third of the way across whiteboard), but *Infinite Space* is... (draws a line all the way across whiteboard). I suppose a *Final Fantasy* might go up to here (Kouno draws a line halfway across whiteboard, chuckling).

How long do you expect it to take the average player to complete *Infinite Space*?

AI: We expected it to take a very long time, but we've been checking internet message boards, and some people have already beaten it! HK: They've really set an amazing pace (laughs).

But for the average user, I expect 28 hours or so to be the halfway point.

AI: The second half of the story is extremely dense, so at that pace it would probably take 60-plus hours to beat. With that said, Mr. Kouno prepared a huge amount of branching story paths, so you won't be able to see everything on your first play.

Infinite Space seems to have a strong influence from classic western PC games, like *Sid Meier's Pirates!*...

HK: Definitely...I can't name any specific title, but back in the PC-98 days (ed. note—the dominant Japanese PC platform in the late 80s/early 90s)...I loved the American games I played. *Infinite Space* is a little different than those space sims—characterization is stronger, for instance—but in the sense that you have freedom to explore and make discoveries, it is similar.

Was there any resistance from Sega about making such an unusual game?

Kouno: It wasn't really resistance...it was more like we were given requests. In the initial design doc, the hero didn't have his own specific mentality. It was very much like a Western RPG—you'd choose his face and his name, but he didn't have a personality. We were planning a straightforward space travel simulation, really. Sega told us that was a little too plain, so we beefed up the story and characterization, but...they never really complained, did they?

AI: They did pick on us a bit (laughs). We were told "As a game, it's not much fun, is it? It's so plain!" and "This sort of genre won't sell"...it was a rough two and a half years (laughs).

HK: This is the first I've heard of that! (laughs) Making an unusual game like this really is a crazy amount of stress. It was the same on *Steel Battalion*...when you present a game unlike anything that's been released before, you worry deeply about if it'll be accepted. I mean...I was vomiting, I was getting cavities (laughs).

Cavities?!

HK: Oh yeah, the stress was making my pH levels way too acidic! (laughs)

AI: You were in and out of the dentist's all the time when the game finished!

HK: *Steel Battalion* gave me two cavities, but *Infinite Space* gave me *three*!

AI: A 50 percent increase! (laughs)

Were you that worried about the game's success?

HK: More worried than I can explain (laughs). I couldn't eat for the three days before it came out—I'd have thrown up.

But it's been a huge success, hasn't it?

HK: My thanks to all the fans! When I heard the news that it had sold out, suddenly I could eat again (laughs).

Something that amazed me during my brief time with the game was the number of crew members—there are literally hundreds, right? Do they all have their own, individual stories?

HK: Writing full-on stories for every crew member would have been impossible, I think (laughs). But almost every single character has at least one scene. Even characters that appear for only one battle—an enemy commander,

say—they have a throughline you can explore if you want.

How did a small company like *Nude Maker* approach making a game of such scope?

HK: Really...there were times I thought I was going to die, making this game (laughs). Most games today are made with huge teams, but *Nude Maker* only has nine employees. Although we did outsource things like ship modeling, there were only three people for scenario and planning. Just three of us did this massive story, all by ourselves (laughs).

So *Nude Maker* was essentially alone in making the game? I wondered how that worked, with Platinum and Sega involved.

AI: Hmmm... well, it's not as if *Nude Maker* is a sub-sub-contractor through Platinum and Sega. The companies' roles are really quite clear, I think: *Nude Maker* is developing, Platinum is producing, and Sega is the publisher. If we had all tried to collaborate together on creating this product, I don't think we would have arrived at anything like the final result.

HK: In terms of business and especially advertising, I'm very thankful to Sega. This shouldn't reflect on Sega either way, but in my mind, making *Infinite Space* was really a sort of tag-team between myself and Mr. Inaba of Platinum Games.

Another thing that impressed me was the music. You haven't publicized the composer... may I ask who it is?

HK: Ah, it's Masafumi Takada, formerly of Grasshopper Manufacture (ed. note—composer of *Killer 7*, *God Hand*, *Samurai Champloo*, *No More Heroes* and many others). He's independent now. There are also compositions by Jun Fukuda, who's still with Grasshopper. I worked with Mr. Takada at another company a long time ago, and I've been a big fan of his since then. I called him before anyone else and begged, "Please do this game!" (laughs)

It's fantastic, especially for DS. It's really not what you'd expect for a space opera.

HK: That's all Takada's style. My requests were for music that felt like it was describing the vastness of space, as opposed to "cool sci-fi music." Takada's interpretation of that is what you hear.

AI: But you had him recompose a lot, didn't you?

HK: About five times per track, actually (laughs). But they were minute adjustments.

You mentioned obsessively reading internet message boards earlier—were there any comments that made you particularly happy?

HK: There were a lot that were in the vein of, "I have work tomorrow, but it was the next morning before I knew it!" The way *Infinite Space*'s story is structured...about a fourth of the way through, it suddenly gets *really* exciting, and around that point people say they don't know when to quit, don't know when to sleep. That made me especially happy.

We've run out of time, but if you have a final comment for play readers...

HK: The whole world is facing tough times, and it might not always be the most fun place to be. Why not try escaping that world for a journey through outer space? *play*



DSiWare Recommendations

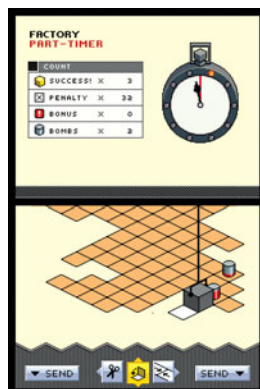
So, I know what some of you out there have been saying: "Hey Eric, I've got this swell new DSi, and a bunch of DSiWare points, but I don't know what to buy with them!" Well, I'm glad you asked, as it gives me a chance to suggest a few great DSiWare games you don't want to miss.

First up is **ArtStyle: Boxlife** (Nintendo, 500 Points), an amazingly addictive and unique puzzle title where you must cut out shapes from a sheet of grid-lined paper that can then be folded into a perfect six-sided box. You do this either via the R&D mode, where you have to figure out how to completely use the paper you're given to make a set number of boxes, or the Factory mode, where you see how many boxes you can make from an endless roll of paper before time runs out. Though simple in concept and execution, Boxlife is easily one of the top DSiWare titles to see release.

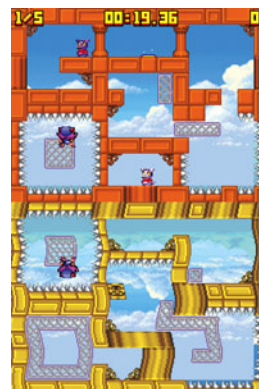
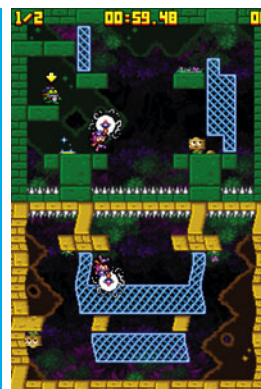
Another game to give your brain a workout is **Might Flip Champs!** (WayForward, 800 Points), a new puzzle-platformer filled with the flair and personality WayForward's games have become known for. To guide our heroine Alta to her destination point, you must "flip" through incomplete versions of each level to give her a safe path from start to finish. Things kick off easy enough when you only have to deal with two map variations, but then that number increases and along with it the difficulty. A definite recommendation for everybody except those who break easily under pressure. **Eric L. Patterson**



ArtStyle: Boxlife Nintendo, 500 Points



Might Flip Champs! WayForward, 800 Pts



"Boxlife is easily one of the top DSiWare titles to see release."

review

System: NDS Developer: Hudson Soft Publisher: Hudson Ent Multi: NA ESRB: Teen Avail: Now

Miami Law

Welcome to Miami (Bienvenidos a Miami)



The Japanese "digital comic" genre of gaming is one that is often misunderstood, and because of this, Miami Law (a game I'd consider part of said genre) has gotten a bit of a bad wrap. Gameplay here consists mainly of two things: reading text boxes, or pressing buttons in the proper order to be able to read more text boxes. But, guess what—that's what digital comics are! What makes this one work are two legitimately interesting main characters, the ability to switch between those characters to see their unique perspectives on the events that unfold, and a selection of mini games that, while not superb, are still quite a lot of fun. Though I wouldn't call Miami Law amazing, as a fan of this genre of gaming, the story kept me entertained and interested until the very end. **Eric L. Patterson**

"...two legitimately interesting main characters..."

parting shot

A bit rough around the edges, but still a good time if you enjoy the genre.

review

System: PSP Developer: Acquire Publisher: NIS America Multi: NA ESRB: Teen Avail: July 2009 (PSN)

Holy Invasion Of Privacy, Badman! What Did I Do To Deserve This?

Now I know how Kefka felt...

Holy Invasion Of Privacy, Badman! What Did I Do To Deserve This?—the awesomely ridiculous name for what Japanese PSP owners got as Yuusha no Kuse ni Namaiki da—was a game I never thought I'd see released here in North America. However, NIS America has given it a chance, and I'm glad that they did.

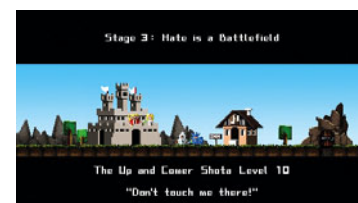
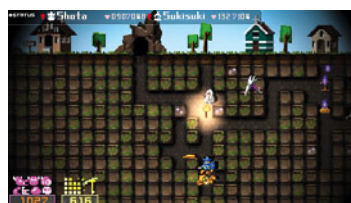
A dark overlord, scheming and dreaming of world domination, summons you—an evil God of Destruction—requesting help in defeating all of the do-gooders that hope to make names for themselves. To do so, you must craft a vast underground labyrinth, and inside it nurture an ecosystem of cruel (and sometimes rather cute) monsters that will

hopefully slay any invading heroes before they can carry your maniacal minion away.

Glad in delightful 16-bit retro stylings, Badman is packed with charm, hilarious gaming parodies (via a top-notch translation), and a relentless level of challenge. It also offers us a new perspective on life; I guess I just never stopped to appreciate exactly how hard gaming's baddies really have it. **Eric L. Patterson**

parting shot

A game as fresh and fun as its challenge is formidable.



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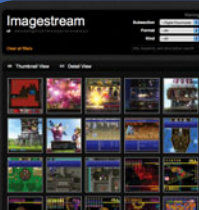
explorer

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the feed

A sampling of the exclusive content recently featured on **play** online

The Uncut BlazBlue Discussion

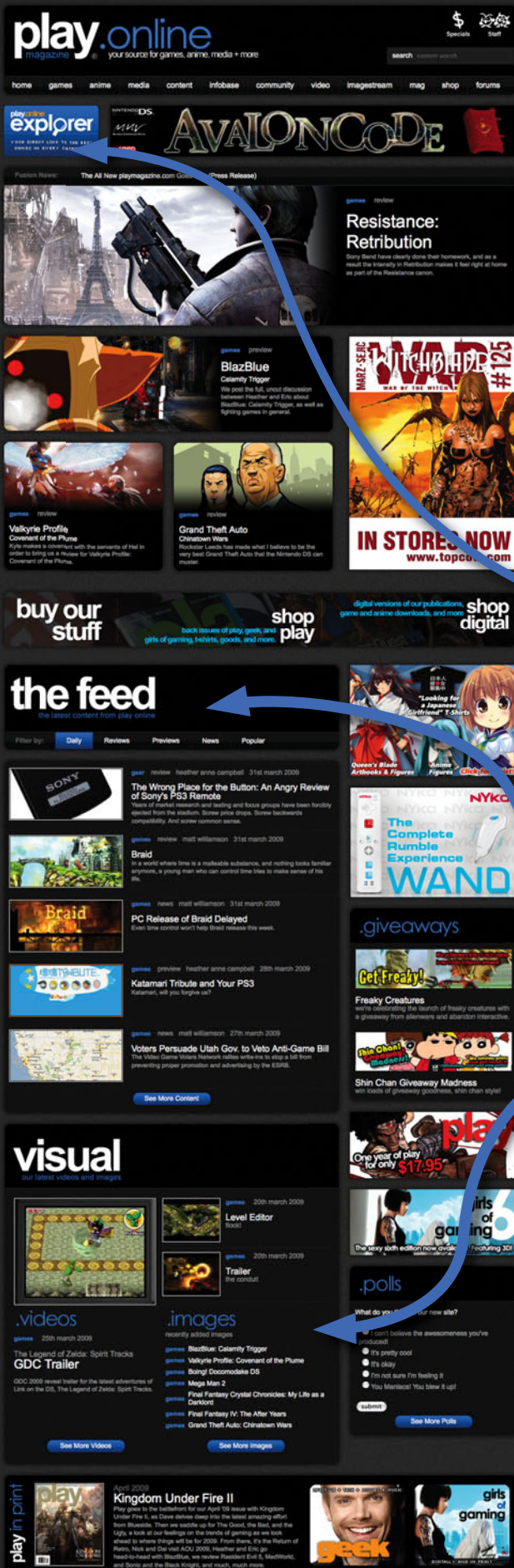
Get the full-length version of Heather and Eric's discussion on not only **BlazBlue**, but the entire state of the fighting game genre. (search: "blazblue discussion")

The Mad World of PlatinumGames

Matt Williamson takes a special look at **PlatinumGames** in honor of the recent release of **MadWorld** for the **Wii**. (search: "platinumgames")

Talking Shop with Jimmy Palmiotti

play online gets a special interview with comic writer **Jimmy Palmiotti**, as we talk **Power Girl**, **The Last Resort**, and more. (search: "jimmy palmiotti")



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preview **Aion**

System: PC **Developer:** NCsoft **Publisher:** NCsoft **Multi:** Massively **Available:** September 22, 2009

Aion

With a side order of wings

words Mike Griffin

Launching in a western MMO market dominated by titles attached to established franchises like Warcraft, Warhammer and Conan, where players often enter the game with very specific expectations of the world, a new IP like Aion is very refreshing. Though familiar in its Korean stylistic tendencies, Aion is more organic, exotic and ethereal, something akin to James Cameron's Avatar, not the typical medieval fantasy hybrid. It's also really, really polished: each time my MMO alarms are tripped and I indulge in direct comparisons to the very best of the genre, Aion stands firm, anchored by big production values and unwavering competence.

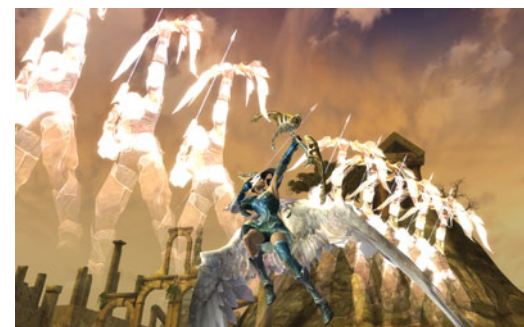
"Aion doesn't go for wall-to-wall shader overkill a la Conan or Vanguard..."

HOW THE WEST WAS WON

Aion is NCsoft's biggest project to date. It's absolutely thriving in South Korea and China, aiming for open beta records in Taiwan, and us North American players are flying in this summer's closed beta sessions. We're about four months into a reborn NCsoft West, post restructuring and staffing at its new Game Production Studios in Seattle. They've hired experienced, camera-friendly leads to put a face on Aion's enormous localization process, like new associate producer Lani Blazier. With a dozen professional writers at her disposal, including experienced fantasy authors and editors, Lani helps to oversee an all-inclusive Western adaptation, featuring sophisticated rewrites and cultural distinctions.

Aion has already been through betas and live updates with millions of players since its winter and spring launches in other regions, so it's arriving optimized, balanced, and polished. The current US beta is all about the translation. "We're really asking beta testers to focus on our updated localization and culturalization content. We have an army of creative writers generating an enormous amount of rewrites. Currently, that's where we need the most feedback," Lani told **play**.

This Westernization process is more about altering hues than assigning entirely new narrative



palettes. "The same NPCs are there, for example, but they speak and behave differently depending on who you are and where you're playing the game. It's not so much that game elements will be present or absent, per se—it's more that the story connections between the elements have been fine-tuned for the culture that's playing the game," Lani explains.

It's good stuff, too. How often do you remember early level quests in MMOs? Yet here I am recalling poor Dabi, down by the docks below the Moslan Forest, in the early Asmodian lands. He spent his youth building up the courage to ask Ademias for her hand in marriage, but as a chosen one, she ascended to become a Daeva before he could offer her a ring. He should be happy for her ascension, worried for her safety, but in a fit of self-pity he tosses the ring away. This is a simple quest that boils down to finding the ring in a nearby area, but it's framed in a bite-sized narrative worth consuming.

You won't find many melodramatic chumps like Dabi among the Asmodians, however. This is a very harsh, tribal, warrior culture, like a cross between ancient Spartan and Native American civilizations. When the planet of Ateia split in half, the humans on the Asmodian upper hemisphere were left in a dark, shattered land. They evolved into more feral beings: raiders and nomads with dark skin and long-manes, haunting night vision eyes, and clawed hands and feet to navigate the coarse, rocky lands. They receive light and energy from the Tower of Eternity at the shattered planet's core, but nothing like the Elyos. These high-spirited, fair-featured humans evolved under brighter skies, in the lush natural paradise of the southern hemisphere. Separated by the Abyss around Ateia's core, the Asmodians and Elyos blame each other for the cataclysm and now send their ascended chosen, the blessed Daeva, to wage extra-planar war.

NOT ANOTHER GRINDFEST

Stigmas in Aion are sort of like Talents in World of Warcraft: they add new skills, power, and specialization to your selected class as he or she levels up. Stigmas in real-life are often unwarranted stereotypes, like when a beta player impulsively declares that Aion is "probably just a poorly-translated Asian grindfest that my computer can't run, lol!" before he's even finished downloading the game. The following day he removes that stigma: "OK, so leveling has been



fast and I'm actually enjoying the quests. Runs great on a laptop I bought last year, no problem with tons of people around!"

I can't fault these guys for the trepidation. After covering Aion's development for three years and witnessing the arrival (and dismissal) of so many middling MMOs in that time, doubts have crept in. But Aion is very convincing. It is perhaps to traditional MMOs as Modern Warfare is to traditional shooters: a shining contemporary example of the form done right, without dramatically altering the form's desired template.

To get a good feel for both melee and ranged characters, I've been adventuring in Aion with a Sorcerer on the Elyos side and a Templar in the Asmodian lands. Creating a character in Aion is intricate, yet effortless. Body size and proportion, all limbs from head to toe, have complete morphology, so you can make a lumbering 7-foot tall warrior or a cute thigh-high munchkin priest, and anything in between—like tall waif rangers or tiny fatmen gladiators. Although you'll have to select from among 22 default face types, click over to the customization area and you'll find over thirty morph sliders dedicated to the size, color and bone structure of your brow, eyes, nose, cheeks, jaw line and lips. Naturally you can fiddle with hair styles, choose some tats, and assign your character's action voice type. And for the very brief time you'll be wearing them, you will select your basic starting clothes.

The early experience is a PvE paradise, as the game gently eases you into its familiar systems, exposes your faction's lifestyle, gears you up, and reveals your godly lineage on the road to Daeva ascension. Aion works hard to earn your trust. It has a smart, concise and categorized quest log with lore and location links built-in. Unlike Warhammer Online's Tome of Knowledge, a superb compendium of history and lore, but almost too much to consume, it's nice to be able to click the links in Aion's quest text for a quick, easily digestible blurb about the people and places immediately in context. The game's maps are attractive hand drawn scrolls, and objectives are smart-tracked within. Looking For Group? Aion has a comprehensive LFG tool to find others, and yes, you can share quests.

Aion's combat feels accurate and reliable, with a pleasant pacing of attacks and chains. An active positional system benefits all melee classes (not

just assassins), and enemy pathfinding is free of the buggery and misbehavior that plague so many online titles. Much of this smooth movement can also be attributed to stable server performance and an optimized graphics engine. You can also enhance your battle calls with a surprisingly good macro system.

Player avatars are well-animated, with lively facial expressions and elaborate moving equipment. There are loads of quality motion-captured emotes and situational idle animations. The landscapes feel solid and good to navigate. Unlike most MMOs out there, your character isn't getting stuck on objects or clipping into every other piece of geometry. I wish you could swim in deep water, but hey, you can fly. Powered flight is for everyone at level 10, earned by ascension (when those lovely upgradable wings sprout from your back). Though flying is limited to certain regions and durations, it's maneuverable and fun—especially as you master aerial combat. I like that you can extend the wings for gliding in any zone, making every cliff a potential launch pad.

CRY ME A RIVER

Back in 2004, Crytek probably never imagined it would see a CryEngine 1-powered MMORPG. Yep, this is the original Far Cry PC engine you see in Aion, modded out the wazoo for online RPG purposes. It's an older engine at this point, yet among the current crop of fantasy MMOs, only Age of Conan can claim superior technology. The first CryEngine still has one hell of a good renderer. In the hands of practiced MMO modelers and gifted artists, it proves to be a great match for Aion.

Various enemies, décor and worked metals receive the full Polybump normal map treatment, highlighted by stunning player armor sets, however Aion doesn't go for wall-to-wall shader overkill à la Conan or Vanguard. Similar to Guild Wars or FFXI, Aion channels its rendering muscle into pastoral density, creating beautiful tableaux of exotic fantasy art, alive with ambient creatures, time and weather. Exploring Atreia wouldn't be the same without its epic and soulful soundtrack, composed and arranged by Ryo Kunihiro (a.k.a. Yang-Bang Ean) and magnificently played by the London Symphony Orchestra and Japan's celebrated Hijiri Kuwano.

Remember how World of Warcraft ran well on



just about any PC when it launched in 2004? Aion will probably do the same in 2009. I've played it extensively on two very different "realistic" rigs: 1) A desktop with a 3 GHz dual core CPU, 4 GB of RAM, and a GeForce GTX 260, and 2) a notebook with a 1.9 GHz dual core, also 4 GB of RAM, and equipped with an 8600 GS video card. Aion runs absurdly smooth on the desktop. We're talking 80+ frames per second *everywhere* outdoors, 100+ indoors, and about 65 FPS in incredibly dense crowds of players—all running at 1920 x 1200, maximum details, with an assuring layer of anti-aliasing. Damn, that's a great way to play Aion.

On the laptop's 1440 x 900 resolution, Aion moved at an eminently playable 30 FPS, plenty of detail enabled, and once again demonstrated a remarkable handling of thick crowds. Loading was super-fast on both systems (clearly 4 GB is a sweet spot). Am I impressed by the astonishing performance I get in Aion on that affordable desktop? Yessir. Would I use the laptop for big PvP encounters in the Abyss, surrounded by dozens of enemy players and AI-controlled dragonmen? Maybe not, but it could actually cope. In any case, system spec likely won't be a barrier for most players.

AT THE CENTER OF IT ALL

Another stigma comes to mind: Some MMO players outright despise PvP. Even when it's totally consensual, the mere mention of it as a form of advancement sends them scurrying. You can purportedly stay clear of Aion's player vs. player stuff right up to level 50 and simply quest the whole way, soaking in the world. Fortunately, I'm down with faction PvP and wise to its rewards. That equipment always rocks. When level 20 rolls around, it's time to hook up with a legion and hunt your sworn foes in the Abyss. [play](#)

An armored guard eyes you warily in the magnificent floating city of Sanctum.

Who says a mage can't catch fish with his bare hands.



CrimeCraft

Gang related violence

words Mike Griffin



“It’s like, I have a gun, but why is yours so much cooler? I have to go on that special gang mission? Or my gang crafter can craft it for me? Damn, I should join a gang!” enthuses CrimeCraft’s senior designer, Mike Donatelli. Mike and a team of about 100 New Jersey, Chicago, and Kiev-based developers at Vogster Entertainment want you to believe that player gangs will carve out the future of CrimeCraft through their exploits and social manifestations. If you’ve ever wanted to advance as a gang member character in a MMORPG, and if said advancement could be attained through twitch third-person shooter action, Vogster may be creating a sub-genre just for you.

The post-apocalyptic future world of CrimeCraft has been wracked by an ecological disaster, reduced to a barren landscape dotted by smaller city-states. The military forces stationed throughout the world fighting wars before the catastrophe were trained and prepared to hold up, re-build and restore order. In CrimeCraft, the world’s criminal factions prove to be equally

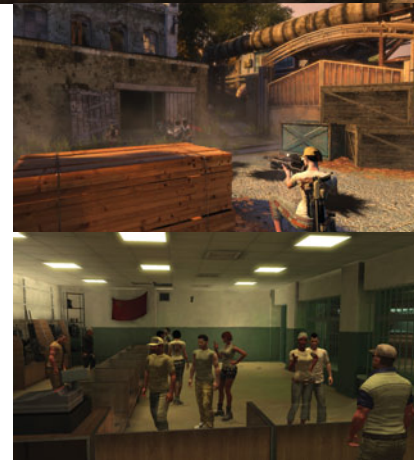
adept at survival in this new era. The agents of law in the outposts and towns are left with no recourse: to curtail anarchy and help defend their cities, they deal-in gang members like you. The largest of these re-born metropolises, home to CrimeCraft players this summer, is Sunrise City.

Like traditional MMOs, your character is indeed persistent and progressive in CrimeCraft. You’ll carve out a build with extensive abilities and boost effects, which you’ll invest in by spending the points and cash you’re awarded while leveling up—raised by running missions and blasting NPCs or players to the pavement. We’re talking passive and active ability slots, slots for a couple of meds (like endorphin speed stimulators), and item enhancement slots, all layered on top of CrimeCraft’s third-person shooter action. You’ll mod essential gear, see improvements to the ranks of resistances and invisibility, increases to the splash radius of frag and heal grenades, and load better ammo into that tricked-out submachine gun, like incendiary rounds with a damage-over-time burn.

To be very clear, character levels in CrimeCraft do not equal raw, relative power increase. They merely expand your total ability pool. So if you put pro gamer Fatal1ty on a level 1 against Joe Gamer the average shooter player on a level 50, Mr. Wendel will still annihilate that level 50. CrimeCraft moves at Unreal Engine 3-powered, mainstream shooter speed, and it’s shooter skill that reigns supreme. Items and gear also lean towards increases in versatility and damage focus, not raw survivability. For example, even the best, most enhanced and specialized end game gun will provide a max potential of about 25% more damage. On the defensive side, one of the best chest pieces, Liquid Armor, maxes out at 10% extra resistance to all damage directed at your chest (which most players instinctually shoot first).

Have you ever looted a piece of armor that looked awesome, then two levels later you loot another with way better stats, but you hate the

“...your deeds may achieve fame and recognition beyond the leaderboards.”



look? A Mesh specialist NPC in CrimeCraft will let you choose the preferred look for any of your outfit pieces. Gangs can use this feature to select a striking shared appearance or color scheme for all their members’ custom crafted threads—like all red ninjas, hardcore black ops, haz-mat suit psychos, or clowns. A clever high-level player might even disguise himself as a low level newbie to confuse foes in PvP.

The attractive Sunrise City is the main social hub in CrimeCraft and home to other key NPCs, quest givers, trainers and vendors. Player gangs will have entrances to their gang headquarters here, where they can plan mission strategies and organize server-wide PvP tournaments (with player-dictated rewards). Vogster has interesting ideas for other city conveniences, like appearance-altering barbers and salons, mini-game districts and special event clubs.

An in-game Sunrise City newspaper will be maintained by professional writers at Vogster. In addition to the game’s over-arching PvE plot, the paper will chronicle the exploits and battles between player gangs, even merging key player characters from the community with expanding PvE storylines. So your deeds may achieve fame and recognition beyond the leaderboards, into new missions and regions.

As we close the issue, Vogster hasn’t settled on the subscription fee they’ll use to roll out regular content expansions and keep CrimeCraft’s dedicated servers humming. A recession-friendly rate below the standard \$15/month would be most intelligent at this juncture... [play](#)

Craft and shop:
From custom gang tags to real-life brands like Ecko Unlimited.



preview

System: PC+Xbox 360 **Developer:** Croteam **Publisher:** CDV/Majesco **Multi:** Co-op **Available:** Fall 2009

Serious Sam

The OG Sam in HD

Sam "Serious" Stone doesn't have the reputation he deserves, especially among console players that may have missed the original Serious Sam. Latter day transitions to console have been hit and miss, and the 2005 sequel, while enjoyable (filled with Croteam's trademark monster stampedes and crazy engine tech), somehow lacked the verve and concise pacing of the PC original. Croteam is deep into production on Serious Sam 3, and that's where the Serious Engine 3 was supposed to debut. It wasn't supposed to debut in a high-definition remake of the original Serious Sam! Yet here we are: thanks to Croteam, partner Devolver Digital, and the publishing pair of Majesco and CDV, Serious Sam HD will arrive via PC and console download this fall. It's a classic, insane monster shooter we should all re-visit.

The old school run 'n' gun FPS is a dying breed. It seems like we're all hung up on large-scale cinematic epics, or these intimidating, over-complex

multiplayer beasts. Forget about those irritating squad commanders living in your ear, futuristic heads-up displays, GPS coordinates, stealth infiltrations, and all the rest of that crap. The original Serious Sam isn't very needy: it just wants you to shoot, run and occasionally jump.

If you stop moving and shooting, you die. Monsters stream out of spawn points in aggressive waves that won't stop crashing until they're vaporized. The humor is absurd, the patterns are awesome, the difficulty scales perfectly, boss encounters are strange and intense, and it feels just right in the ancient Egyptian setting, as Sam pursues Mental through time.

In Serious Sam HD, every texture, asset and effect has been refurbished and re-lit through Serious Engine 3. And true to the original, SS HD will include the legendary four-player online co-op that old-school Sam players remember so fondly, back when online co-op was but a wee, tiny niche. **Mike Griffin**



"...a classic, insane monster shooter we should all re-visit."

preview

System: PC+Xbox 360 **Dev:** Piranha Bytes **Pub:** Deep Silver **Multi:** Single Player **Available:** 2009

Risen

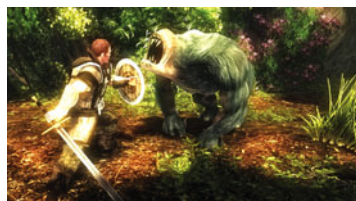
Gothic and subtropic

Since it only achieved moderate success on these shores, a lot of people don't realize that the Gothic franchise has a massive following in Europe, where huge fan communities track each release of the RPG series and game groupies trail the developer, Piranha Bytes, from event to event. I've always admired the open-ended RPG ambition of the Gothic games; they're sort of like the clumsy-yet-comparable European counterpart to Bethesda's Elder Scrolls. The great technology, rich autonomous AI and world systems, open character

development—it's all there. And now it's moving into Risen, Piranha's Bytes' first new IP in many years.

Like Gothic 3, Risen has you entering the world with a one-time formal loading screen, and then it's all seamless world streaming from that point onward. You play a lone shipwreck survivor washed-up on a lush, highly volcanic Mediterranean island just in time for the return of ancient evils. Spread across four huge chapters and culminating in multiple endings, Risen continues Piranha Bytes' sandbox RPG legacy. **Mike Griffin**

"Spread across four huge chapters and culminating in multiple endings."



preview

Developer: REDDUCK **Publisher:** iiji.com **Multi:** Online only **Available:** 2009

Alliance of Valiant Arms

Tanks for the nukes

When NHN USA snagged the US rights to Huxley, the multi-player online giant pledged to continue its pursuit of hardcore shooters, even going so far as to retrofit its iiji.com gaming portal with a slightly darker edge. Another step down this path appears to be Alliance of Valiant Arms, the latest Unreal Engine 3-powered team shooter destined for iiji.

Unlike Huxley, which is most assuredly a massively multiplayer RPG/FPS hybrid, AVA is more of a traditional multiplayer team shooter. While there are points to earn and spend on hundreds of persistent

soldier upgrades in Battlefield/Call of Duty fashion, there's no questing here. AVA invests the bulk of its content into many different modes designed to host battles between European Union and Neo Russian Federation forces. Besides a couple of cooperative survival modes played versus AI foes and designed for 4-players (including the popular Prison Break mode), AVA boasts intense multi-round squad vs. squad combat in team deathmatch, vehicle escort, warhead transport, and demolition (think Counter-Strike) modes. Look for the beta later this summer. **Mike Griffin**



Potions on demand

Dungeons & Dragons Online goes free-to-play



We've seen it happen before with Asian-origin MMORPGs like ArchLord and RF Online: they launched in the western market as monthly subscription titles, then later converted into (more) successful hybrid free-to-play models. Rarely does this occur with US-developed massively multiplayer games. As of this summer, Dungeons & Dragons Online, developed by Westwood, MA-based Turbine, will be going free-to-play in Ebberron Unlimited. With the popular Asheron's Call games in its past and The Lord of the Rings Online securing its present, adventuring forth under the new free play model for DDO is a timely and well-executed move for this venerable online gaming house.

Much time had elapsed since our last journey into the world of Dungeons & Dragons Online. Our strongest, fondest impressions were of the dungeons themselves, as DDO is all about the instanced dungeon crawl. These aren't just warehouses for monster grinding; in pen and paper spirit, you'll contend with dedicated puzzles, fatal traps, and complex navigation—with ladders, swimming sections, and magically-guarded doorways to reveal. Although other D&D rules-based RPGs like Neverwinter Nights may cover a wider breadth of persnickety stats tweaking and moral dilemmas, to this day there's no online representation of classic, cooperative, DM-guided dungeon crawls as effective as the best dungeons in DDO. Specifically, it excels at connecting your D&D avatar—and his or her skills—to environmental challenges.



“...the new free play model for DDO is a timely and well-executed move.”

liven up your early game.

We purchased the Favored Soul class straight off. Next we shopped for Adventure Packs. These include many of the top dungeons for each level range, the stuff a monthly subscriber (still an option, incidentally) has full access to. It's not progress-halting if you don't have these quests, and you'll end up earning enough points to unlock them, but it's nice to buy on demand. You could call up some buddies (“It's free dude!”), drop 250 Turbine Points on a party Adventure Pack, and roll some elite dungeons together while hilarity ensues over the built-in voice chat. We picked up The Sharn Syndicate, a pack of six uniquely-crafted missions in a series. The seamless in-game storefront also includes armor, ammo and weapons, minor XP and loot probability boosts, NPC hirelings, a range of heals, cures, rez, and stat buffs, and enhanced storage—like shared bank slots for your characters.

Re-visiting DDO proved to be a pleasant technical experience, years into the engine's optimization. On a current mid-range dual core PC you'll see outstanding frame rates, as any recent generation of video card will manhandle DDO. Our test rig had an entry-level GTX 260, for example, and we were reporting 90+ FPS everywhere in sight at maximum detail levels, in DX10 rendering mode no less, at 1200p resolution. Recent laptops shouldn't have a problem with the game either.

While DDO soars as a fun crawler, many players feel that the overall scope of design is a little too narrow to justify another MMO game subscription. As a free-to-play proposition, however, Ebberron Unlimited is instantly one of the best options available. [play](#)



Now that it's free-to-play, thousands of curious onlookers will finally have a go at DDO. The Ebberron Unlimited client is built for speed and micro-transaction accompaniment. Embracing a new on demand background loading scheme (a la Guild Wars), you'll enter the game and begin playing in minutes after a very short download install. The first DDO Store temptation is visible at character select, where you'll see extra slots to buy (you start with two) and a few premium race and class selections, like the Drow (it'll cost you to create that Drizzt Do'Urden wannabe!), Warforged, Monk and Favored Soul.

There's more to these premium selections than vanity. The Drow has strong innate magic, Warforged make great tanks, the Monk is a tornado in close unarmed melee combat, and the Favored Soul is a really effective burst healer. Happily, the Turbine Points you use to purchase said race and class goods can also be earned by playing other race/class combinations and earning the unlocks. So if your heart is set on one of the premium character choices, you're still in the realm of Totally Free with a little saving up via gameplay. Or for a few bucks, you can really

Final Fantasy VII

retrospective

words Heather Anne Campbell

Final Fantasy VII is not a retro game. It is a *vintage* game. Consider the difference: Retro means “of the style of an earlier time.” Vintage, on the other hand, is defined as *representing the high quality of the past*. It’s time we started distinguishing between vintage games and retro gaming. And what better place to start than the re-release of Final Fantasy VII for PSN, playable on either your PS3 or your PSP?

In the first two weeks of its re-release, Final Fantasy VII was purchased and downloaded more than 100,000 times, a testament to its longevity—and almost ten million people have already bought a hard copy of Final Fantasy VII. More than a decade after the game originally came out, there are still thousands of people willing to pay for it again. It’s the Star Wars of video-games; it’s not the best, nor the most mature game ever made, but the entertainment it offers is generationally blind. And happily, unlike the father of Star Wars, the creators of Final Fantasy VII have respected the original, leaving it strange and flawed, but ultimately unchanged and classic. Any renovations they’ve wished to visit on the universe have been confined to other games and experiences.

This approach has been highly successful. A PSP prequel, Final Fantasy VII: Crisis Core, has been embraced as one of the handheld’s best-selling titles. The cinematic sequel to Final Fantasy VII, Advent Children, was a financial feast for Square Enix. The Blu-Ray release of the film debuted at number two on the sales charts; a noteworthy achievement for a high-definition update to a Japanese-animated CG spin-off of a video game that came out in the 1990’s.

These sales figures do not denote quality, but rather popularity. Fortunately, Final Fantasy VII is one of those rare places where both success and merit intersect. The game is worth praise, not only due to the magnitude of its achievements, but also because of the influence it had over the industry. Final Fantasy VII brought Japanese role playing games to the west, and the twisted revelations

“Final Fantasy VII is one of those rare places where both success and merit intersect.”

of its narrative set forth that gaming could go beyond the simple fables of good and evil, and into more mature and uneasy territories. FFFVII’s isolated perspective paved the way for console games like Braid, by submitting that plot could be a subjective experience of the player-protagonist. It may not have been gaming’s Citizen Kane, nor its Moby Dick, but perhaps Final Fantasy VII was part of the gateway, a piece of the path that will lead us to something grand.

So, what did Final Fantasy VII achieve? Beyond the soap-opera turns of its plot, FFFVII was a landmark of polish. Borrowing from film techniques, the developers (specifically Tetsuya Nomura, credited with both Character Design and Battle Visuals) sought to make the console RPG a cinematic experience. Now, film may not be the best template for games—the vocabulary of camera moves and edits are unnecessary in a medium where the camera is virtual—but still, adopting the pans and crane-style sweeps of modern movies was a leap forward for presentation.

JRPGs’ combat systems grew out of the technical limitations of old consoles, and by 1997, the language of these role-playing games had become a genre of sorts, a style that was both stagnant yet self-propagated. FFFVII expanded the complexity of these JRPG systems, but exhibited it as a spectacle, representing the execution of text decisions as a visual drama. The game can be credited with, among other things, making menus into something interesting to watch.



Additionally, the character designs of Final Fantasy VII heralded a new direction for popular console RPGs. Unlike the delicate and nuanced art of Yoshitaka Amano, Tetsuya Nomura’s work was simple, angular, and drew more obviously from anime. The result was a cast of iconic characters that worked well as simple polygons, a necessity for execution on the PlayStation. Other RPG series would follow suit, and today it’s more likely that a console RPG stars a cast of anime look-alikes than an ensemble composed in the soft finish of water colors.

These powerful choices were divisive upon their implementation. Having spent forty-five million dollars on the game, and one-hundred million more on advertising, Squaresoft polarized its existing fanbase while appealing to this new audience. For many, VII was the first time they’d experienced a JRPG, as the word-of-mouth (and television spots) spread the

game beyond the small, but dedicated following of the previous Final Fantasies. As a result, players expected successive games to feature the Dystopian settings and angst teenage protagonists of VII. When Square returned to medieval themes in IX, players responded with apathy, solidifying the direction of future Final Fantasy games. One needs to look no further than the trailers of Final Fantasy XIII to see how much VII has affected the progression of the series. Gone are the stagnant camera and romanticized European settings. In their place are the flashy edits, and goth-punk designs that typify modern Final Fantasy games.

None of these points, though, gets to an unquantifiable quality of Final Fantasy VII. The fact is, the game is enjoyable, and remains so, despite its age. The soundtrack, characters, and presentation coalesce in a way that is highly melancholic, yet in some way fun. Somehow, the title is elevated beyond what was certainly a checklist of ideas and locations, and the result is a mixed whole greater than the sum of its parts. And that is what makes this game a vintage piece. Certainly, it is not just a retro game, indicative of an old style, because Final Fantasy VII ushered in a new style for JRPGs. Rather, it is representative of a high quality from the past, and gains momentum as a classic with each re-release. [play](#)



“The best shows are often the most implausible, especially when there’s anything patently evil involved.”

D. Gray-Man

Season One Part 1 & 2 Collection

Innocence Lost

words Dave Halverson

Set against the backdrop of 19th Century Europe, *D. Gray-Man* is a schizophrenic tale about an order of Exorcists (the Black Order no less) that serve as mankind’s only hope for survival, and the Millennium Earl—the one threatening it—and his vile a-bomb-inations called Akuma. I’ve come across some pretty vile monsters watching anime over the years, but these things take the immoral cake. To create his Akuma, the Earl preys on people in mourning by promising them he can bring their loved one back if they’ll just call out their name...Psyche! Doing so rips their loved one’s soul from heaven’s warm embrace and imprisons it within a cannon-covered carcass of varying degrees of deformity. Thus enslaved by the Earl, to complete the transformation he orders the freshly minted monstrosity to devour their loved one (serves ‘em right) and become Akuma. That’s messed up. The only thing that can kill an Akuma—and the Earl’s been working overtime—is an Exorcist using an Akuma weapon forged from “Innocence,” the same substance the Earl uses to

forge his heavy metal minions. So let the fray begin; he, it, or she who possesses the Innocence, wins.

The main character in *D. Gray-Man*, Allen Walker is your typical anti-hero. Soft spoken, kind, and outwardly scrawny, he’s also an Akuma’s worst nightmare. Akuma can disguise themselves as humans so convincingly that most Exorcists can’t tell them apart, putting them at a big disadvantage. Not so for Allen, whose cursed left eye allows him to see the truest evil and whose left arm grows into a massive living instrument of death. Sounds creepy right? An order of Exorcists battling a demon lord and his unholy army with the fate of mankind hanging in the balance... Nah, not so much. The Black Order is your typical dysfunctional family. The most powerful Exorcist, Kanda, has a king size chip on his shoulder and regards Allen as pretty much pond scum (unless there’s something lower I don’t know about); the titular female Exorcist, Lenalee, has some serious baggage, and her brother Komui, who also happens to be the science officer and administrator of the Order, is certifiably and unequivocally insane in the membrane. The Millennium Earl is all top hat and teeth on a body that resembles Dr. Egg Man, and many a scenario and Akuma are, to say the least, bumbling, and/or cheeky. That is, when it’s not gravely serious. One minute Komui is blowing up half the world because a male associate accidentally grazed Lenalee’s hand over tea, and the next one of the Order is pinned down in agony by a disgusting Akuma gushing blood by the gallon (glug,glug).

Such is the wonderful world of anime. The best shows are often the most implausible, especially when there’s anything patently evil involved, and nobody sinks as low as the Millennium Earl. *D. Gray* is a great-looking show too, and has a tendency to catch you off guard and sneak in a bit of genuine emotion now and again. Get back you faker! Most of all though, it’s just silly good fun. “Bring forth salvation to this tormented Akuma’s soul!” [play](#)

parting shot

Help Wanted: Flexible hours, travel to exotic locales, free room & board. Experience with unholy soul sucking abominations a plus. Benefits include snappy dialogue, situations of intense violence, and an Exorcist in a mini skirt.

Kaze no Stigma

In His Element

words Bill Gray

No matter how hard you try, you're just never going to be good at some things. Take singing, for example. Though I love music, and have a decent ear, I couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. Now, imagine my family rated my worth to them on the basis of nothing but my ability to sing Verdi. It wouldn't be long before I'd sing myself out of the family. Now, substitute "using fire magic" for "singing Verdi," and you have the setup of *Kaze no Stigma*, Funimation's latest.

Kazuma was born a member of the proud fire-magic wielding Kannagi family—born first in line to take over, as a matter of fact. However, he lacked the ability to use fire magic, which resulted in merciless teasing, general family shame, and eventually to his father completely disowning him. Talk about tough. Four years later, Ayano Kannagi, a headstrong, powerful teenage fire mage, is heir-apparent to the headship of the family, having defeated Kazuma during the successor ceremony. One problem—Kazuma's back, having acquired the ability to use a completely different element, wind, and even though he says he's not interested in revenge or in taking over the Kannagi family, people in the family keep dying at the hands of wind magic.

Despite *Kaze no Stigma*'s conventional beginnings and uneven animation, the story and especially the characters carry the day. Though not on par with Light Yagami of *Death Note* fame, Kazuma is a rarity among anime types—an antihero you can cheer for, even as you wonder what he's going to do next. His developing relationship with Ayano; his ambiguous motivations; his murky, troubled past; and especially his immense power make him a compelling watch—much more so than some of the action scenes in the story, which can feel stiff and awkwardly animated. If you like your heroes troubled, dark and charismatic, you'll love *Kaze no Stigma*. [play](#)



parting shot

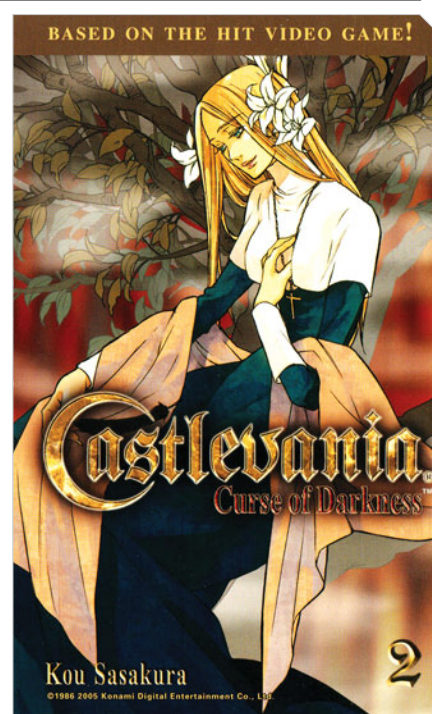
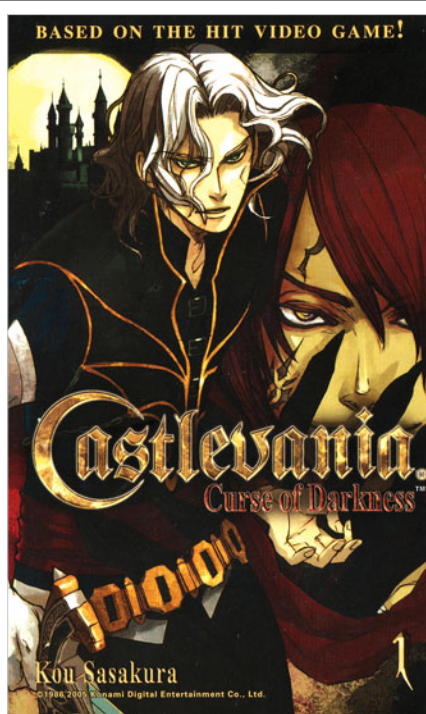
Though seemingly typical anime fare at first, Kazuma's character rescues *Kaze No Stigma* from the conventional.

"Kazuma is a rarity among anime types—an antihero you can cheer for, even as you wonder exactly what he's going to do next."

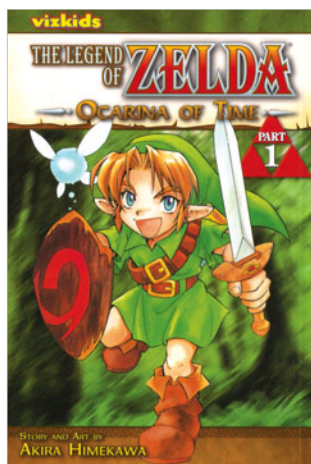
now reading

words Dave Halverson

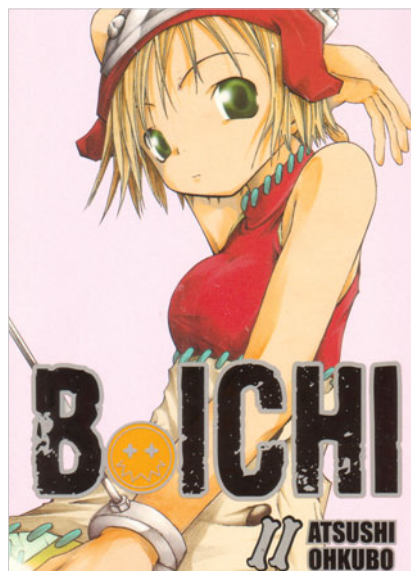
Betcha didn't know there was a Castlevania manga going on. And even if you did, I bet you didn't know if it's any good or not. Don't let the lineage fool you—I kid; Curse of Darkness was actually the best of Iga's 3D 'vanias (may they rest in pieces)—this isn't some hackneyed American anti-manga; it's the real thing. Need proof? OK, ready? The first few pages...color. There you go right there. All the best manga have four shiny color pages. No really, Kou Sasakura does a surprisingly good job fleshing out a mostly straightforward action game into a read that feels like Castlevania. Of course I read it with the SoTN soundtrack playing in the background. Betcha didn't know there was a Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time manga either. This one is from VIZ Kids, so it's not always racked in the main manga aisle—you know, the one where you can't get to what you want to BUY because some O-Tacos are gummin' up pages on the floor—so you may have to take a trip to



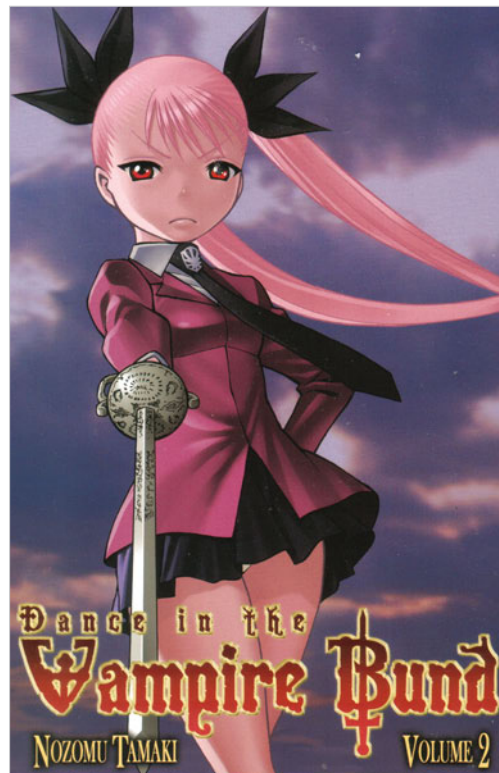
“Kou Sasakura does a surprisingly good job fleshing out a mostly straightforward action game into a read that feels like Castlevania.”



the kiddy section, but it's presented and written like any written Teen-or-up manga. I'm sure it was with all the big-boy manga in Japan, but we all know VIZ. Anything that doesn't drip blood or shake boobies—pure kid's stuff. It's a shame too because this is a phenomenal pair of books beautifully illustrated and written. Ocarina is one of my favorite games ever and I was 100% glued. I can't recommend it enough. Elsewhere BolCHI may look like it's kid's stuff but no way Jose. BolCHI is about a very peculiar boy named Shotaro who also happens to be a “dokeshi”—people with a special “condition” that allows them to use a greater percentage of their brain to wield various special powers. Since most dokeshi use their “gift” for ill-gotten gains they are widely looked down on, but Shotaro is different. His ability lets him channel the powers of any animal by biting its bones, but not only is he not “bad,” he's blindly optimistic with a penchant for justice. When he hooks up with Mana (left), all crazy breaks loose; and you definitely wanna be there to see where it lands. Finally, if you love vampires but are fed up with the dried up old stereotypes, you absolutely must Dance in the Vampire Bund! [play](#)



Mana hooks up with Shotaro in BolCHI.



Big Man Japan

Studio: Magnolia Home Entertainment



For a Japanese film to be labeled eclectic requires some Herculean efforts on the part of its filmmaker—this is, after all, a country that produces truly head-scratching movies in all genres on a yearly basis. But Hitoshi Matsumoto's *Big Man Japan* earns the label by presenting scene after scene of truly jaw-

dropping visuals, all strung together in mockumentary format. Matsumoto, one of Japan's top comics, also stars in the title role—a put-upon slob saddled with defending the country from invading monsters, whom he fights by transforming into a four-story, electroshock-haired version of himself. However, unlike Ultraman (or even Zebraman, Takashi Miike's previous meta-superhero), *Big Man Japan* is treated with disdain by the public, which makes saving them from the army of Big Daddy Roth/Basil Wolverton-esque creatures running amok a little difficult. The scenes between BMJ and the monsters should amuse both the kaiju faithful and casual viewers alike, though the sluggish pace and dry humor might put off those hoping for an out-and-out, cartoonish monster brawl. One should try to hold on for the finale, which decimates international relations and hero worship in one big, goofy swoop. **Paul Gaita**

[REC]

Studio: Sony Pictures

It's unfortunate that most of the surprises found in the Spanish horror film *[REC]* have been blunted by its near-note-for-note American remake, *Quarantine*, because on a scene-for-scene basis, it's one of the most harrowing features in recent history. The premise is identical to the remake—a TV cameraman captures the mounting panic



and terror that results after a reporter tags along with a fire crew on a call to an apartment building that quickly fills with the berserk and bloodthirsty victims of an unknown virus—with the core difference being the lack of build-up prior to the visit to the building, which was the dreariest part of *Quarantine*, and the source of the contagion, which here has

an intimated (and slightly hokey) religious connection. Otherwise, it's the equal of its remake in terms of sheer pound-for-pound shocks, delivered at a breathless, breakneck pace. Sony's DVD only includes a making-of featurette, which is slight when compared to the double-disc Region 2 release. However, the ferocity of the film itself is its chief selling point. **Paul Gaita**

Dr. Strangelove

Studio: Sony Pictures



Leave it to Stanley Kubrick to turn a cautionary tale about impending nuclear holocaust into one of the funniest movies ever made. According to the just-released 45th Anniversary Blu-ray, *Dr. Strangelove* was originally intended to be a searing thriller until Kubrick realized that too many safeguards were already in place to seriously consider the devastating possibilities detailed in its source material. Restored in glorious black and white—although in a continuous 1.66:1 aspect ratio rather than Kubrick's

original, multiple formats—the movie thankfully retains all of its comedic resonance thanks to universally terrific performances by Peter Sellers, George C. Scott, Slim Pickens, and Sterling Hayden. Meanwhile, a massive wealth of bonus material further expands and explores its legacy, including featurettes and interviews about both its artistic and cultural impact, making the set a substantive look at a classic movie, and a superlative addition both to anyone's burgeoning Kubrick Blu-ray collection. **Todd Gilchrist**

Friday the 13th Parts 2 and 3 in 3-D

Studio: Paramount



To commemorate the release of Marcus Nispel's *Friday the 13th* remake, which itself is available this month in both a theatrical version and a "killer" extended

cut, Paramount reissued Parts 1, 2 and Part 3 in 3-D on Blu-ray, and parts 4-6 on DVD—all of which look far better than they probably deserve. Thanks to having one of the few smart and sensitive protagonists in the series' history, Part 2 holds up surprisingly well, while Part 4 is probably the best-made of all of the early films. (Part 3's 3-D has never been clearer, but the side effect of that clarity is the realization that the movie has nothing else going for it.) But all of the discs feature interesting, relevant bonus content in addition to pitch-perfect presentation, making these by far the best releases yet of the Friday films, and a must-have for anyone eager to give Jason yet another life after death. **Todd Gilchrist**

True Romance

Studio: Warner Home Video



As much wish-fulfillment for many of its audience members as for its screenwriter, Quentin Tarantino's *True Romance* heralded his arrival in Hollywood as much

as it introduced the cinephile-fan boy as a new hero of modern pop culture. Littered with cameo appearances, choice dialogue and wall-to-wall movie references, the film holds up as an almost quaint rendering of Tarantino's

The Saragossa Manuscript

Studio: Facets



A favorite of fabulists ranging from Luis Bunuel and David Lynch to Jerry Garcia, Polish director Wojciech Has's 1965 cult favorite remains one of the most intricate and beguiling Chinese boxes ever committed to film. Based on a 19th century novel by Jan Potocki, *Saragossa* stars *Ashes and Diamonds*' Zbigniew Cybulski (the

Polish James Dean, who met an equally untimely death) as a 17th-century military captain who discovers the title book while on campaign in Madrid and falls under its spell; what follows is a sort of Möbius strip of dreamlike adventures experienced by Cybulski as he pores over the pages, steeped in sensual, comic and occasionally horrific trappings, and each folding into itself and each other as plot grows more labyrinthine. A favorite among counterculture audiences in the mid-'60s, its three-hour running time was trimmed down to 120 minutes for its U.S. theatrical release; Garcia and Martin Scorsese both funded the restoration to its full length version, which is included here. Helpful and informative liner notes do much to explain the complexities of the plot and detail the film's history. **Paul Gaita**

earliest movie-literate storytelling sensibility, while director Tony Scott seems to be discovering—almost on screen—that filmmakers can invest their films with both form and substance. The Blu-ray looks terrific, highlighting Scott's typically glossy cinematography, but three feature-length commentaries, an alternate ending and a collection of deleted scenes give the film depth that lasts long after its polished style and hipster cool has worn off. But even as a preamble to the days before Bill got killed, *True Romance* remains terrific if for no other reason than being the film that began the world's love for all things Tarantino. **Todd Gilchrist**

3-in-1 Virtual Retro Adaptor

www.innexinc.com \$19.99

Do you remember when: you first stormed Bowser's castle in Super Mario Bros. 3, drooled over Mode 7 graphics in F-Zero or fought tooth and nail via 4 player splitscreen in Goldeneye? Well, now you can relive those days on your Wii thanks to the 3-in-1 Virtual Retro Adaptor from Innex and Komodo. Cleverly shaped like a Nintendo 64 console, the adaptor plugs directly into the GameCube controller port on your Nintendo Wii and supports Virtual Console playback through the use of 1st and 3rd party NES, SNES and N64 controllers.



CrossFire Remote Pistol

www.PenguinUnited.com \$39.99

Cheap plastic gun molds step aside and make room for the CrossFire Remote Pistol from Penguin United; the Wii's first and only gun that has the remote already integrated into its design. Taking current Wii gun designs and turning them on their head, the CrossFire Remote Pistol aims to give gamers a "true 'gun' experience" with a solid design that is backed up by a repositioned B-Button for trigger finger access, a repositioned A-Button and D-Pad for easy thumb access while holding pistol and enhanced vibration for a more realistic overall gameplay experience. I'm sold. Anyone up for a game of House of the Dead: Overkill?



USB Classic Joystick

www.thumbsupusa.com \$19.99

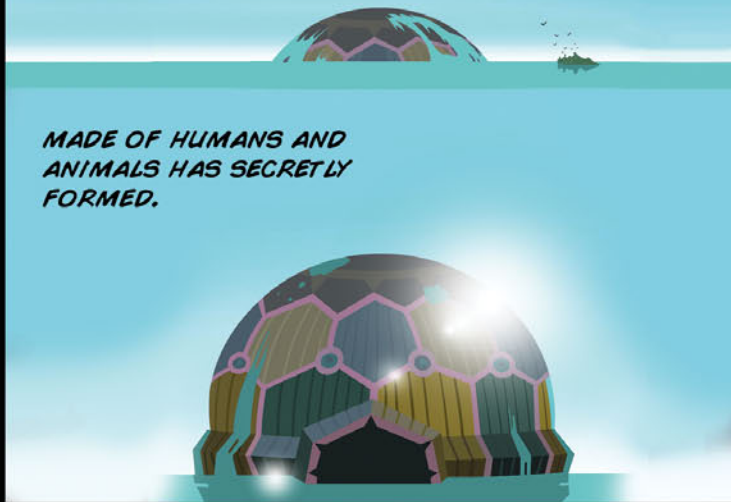
Sometimes a keyboard and mouse just doesn't cut it when looking to overthrow a high-score in a classic game. Jobs like this call for something a little more...retro. Thumbs Up has heard the cries of the classic gamer and has responded with the USB Classic Joystick. Yes, you heard me right, a joystick. This isn't one of those 12+ button controllers that demands full use of all four limbs and all twenty digits while shouting commands and obscenities into a headset, rather the Classic Joystick keeps it simple with a one-button, one-stick control system, powered by a standard USB cable. A must-have for classic gamers of all ages.



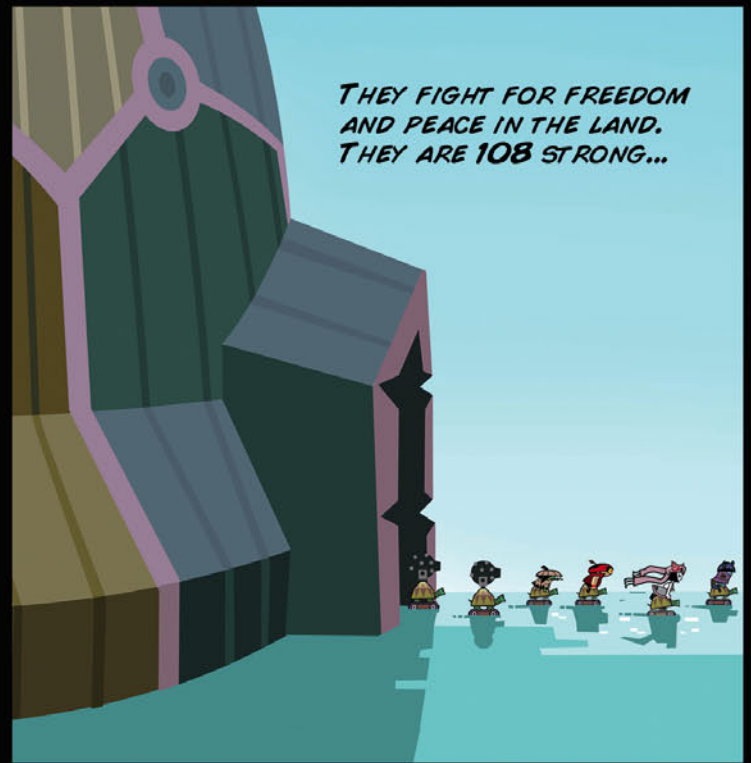
*BUT THE FORCES OF EVIL
CANNOT GO UNANSWERED*

*A GROUP OF HEROES, A
TRUE REBEL FORCE,*

*MADE OF HUMANS AND
ANIMALS HAS SECRETLY
FORMED.*



*THEY FIGHT FOR FREEDOM
AND PEACE IN THE LAND.
THEY ARE 108 STRONG...*



■ A page from Hero 108

SO FEW TO STAND UP AGAINST THE COMING TIDE...

TO BE CONTINUED...

HERO:
108
水火外傳
ORIGINS



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Blah, blah, blah

BACK OF THE BOOK

08_09 STEVE HASKE
Online Editor

Going against the grain

I was reading an interesting quote from Kaz Hirai the other day that got me thinking. To paraphrase, Hirai basically said consoles need core games, because if you're not serving a core audience, your platform will be lacking in stability and, even if it's popular at first, said audience will probably eventually get tired of your wares and move on. Clearly, this was a none-too-subtle jab at Nintendo's all-in approach to the casual market, and he makes a very good point. But I'm not here to talk about Sony or its hardware strategy. Instead, I want to apply the same idea to other hot trends in the industry. After reading the quote, I started considering the fragility of industry patterns in general, and how they're entirely subject to the winds

“More and more developers, whether native or not, are becoming increasingly and alarmingly exclusionary in their western design sensibilities.”

of change. For me, Kaz' words were just a jumping off point.

Take, for instance, the seemingly ubiquitous increase and expansion of western development, even among several beloved or classic series that had their start in Japan. Now, I'm aware this is not a new trend, nor am I automatically against western teams taking a stab at traditionally Japanese series. But, for the most part, I still take such efforts with a grain of salt, because I know that a western interpretation is obviously going to be different.

See, for me at least, a big allure of Japanese games doesn't always have to come strictly from gameplay or design, necessarily, but from aesthetics, whether coming from Kojima's fourth-wall breaking antics or the visual designs of Akihiko Yoshida. But there's no getting around it: as much as I love western games—and often, I really do—Japanese games more often than not have a stylistic punch that others lack.

Don't get me wrong. I have a lot of all-time favorites that didn't come from Japan: Sierra and Lucasarts' old point and clicks, Half-Life, Soul Reaver, and the beautifully realized Uncharted spring to mind, for instance. But East and West each have their own strengths and weaknesses, and there's a definite disparity between the two. So, as much as I might be intrigued by the tweaks that say, Climax is making to the new Silent Hill, I'm still wondering just where the hell Team Silent has been for the last several years. And what if Ueda decided to scrap The Last Guardian, ditching the original members of Team ICO to work on a new project with some fresh blood from Europe or California? There'd be riots in the streets. The end result just wouldn't feel right. It's the same reason there could never be a western Bayonetta, and why I'll always, without question, prefer Street Fighter to Mortal Kombat.

And yet, more and more developers, whether native or not, are becoming increasingly and alarmingly exclusionary in

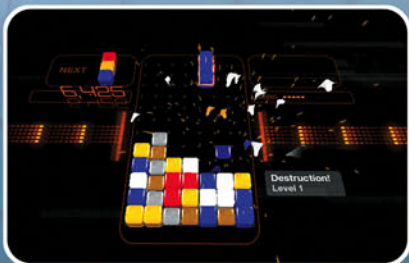
their western design sensibilities. On the same token, particularly among western developers, far too many new games seem to be limited to a few select genres and ideas. God of War was so great that its template must be used in everything; same for open world games. And squad-based cover shooters. And forced AI co-op. And then there's my personal favorite, regenerating health. Does anyone remember how ridiculous it was to recover from a mortal shotgun blast to the gut simply by leaning against a wall for a minute or two in The Getaway? It's still just as ridiculous. Yet finding an action game without it in this day and age is getting harder and harder to do.

The point is, whether you're dealing with an exponential increase in western developed games or simple nuts and bolts design decisions, it's ok to buck trends and go against the grain. In fact, more companies should be doing it. Obviously, there's budgetary and deadline issues for publishers, and execs want to approve tried and true concepts that they don't have to bank on selling well. But do we really need elements like cover shooting in every game? Did it really add that much more to RE5? No. There's a proper time and place for this and other overused gameplay elements, and a shotgun approach the likes of what we've been subject to lately hasn't exactly endeared them to me.

Furthermore, even with the Japanese market continuing to shrink, that doesn't mean all Japanese developers should entirely abandon their aesthetic and design sensibilities for the current hot trend of western teams. East and West are both important, and continual partnership between the two seems like it could only be a good thing—only, however, if that cooperation can bear the fruit of both Eastern and Western design philosophy. After all, expansion and globalization are good for the industry. Homogeneity? Not so much.

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play

A character with light-colored hair, wearing a red jacket and dark pants, stands on a stone bridge. The bridge has a metal railing and leads to a building with a sign that says "WHEEL COMPANY". The building is made of brick and has a large doorway. The scene is set in a steampunk environment with various mechanical details and a dark, atmospheric background.

**Bonus
Digital
Content**





bonus

Resonance of Fate

System: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 Developer: tri-Ace Publisher: Sega Available: Spring 2010





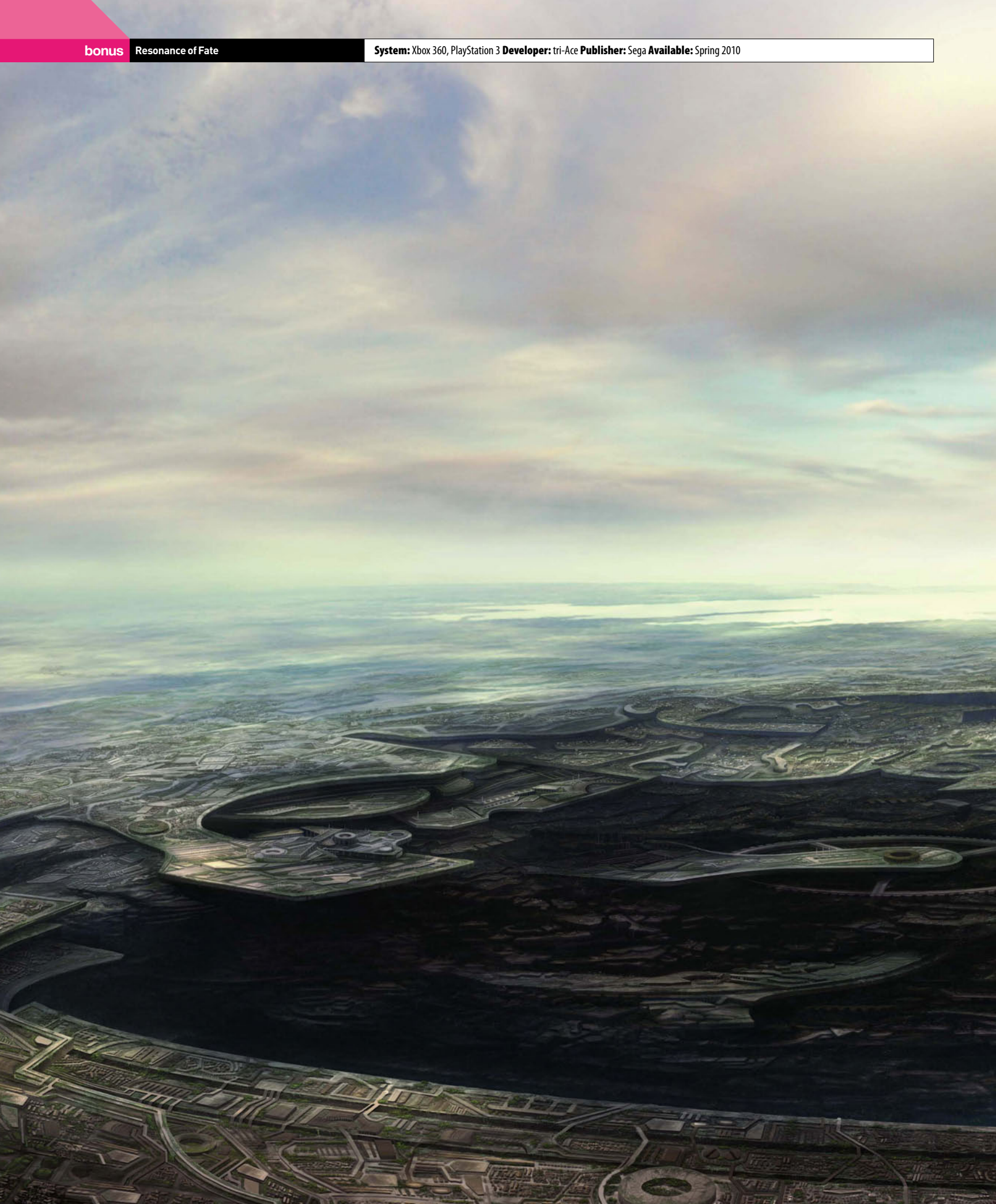




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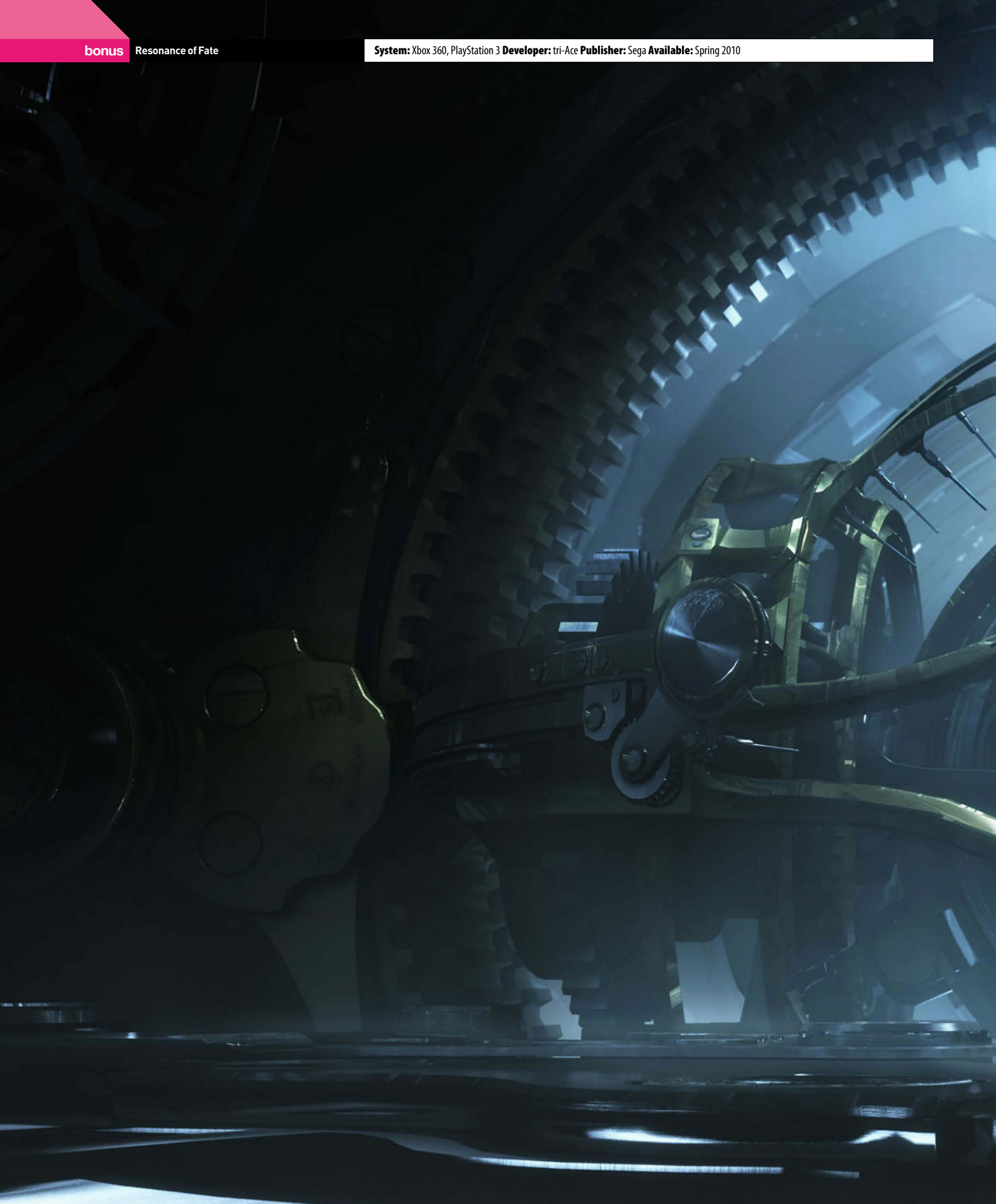




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Resonance of Fate

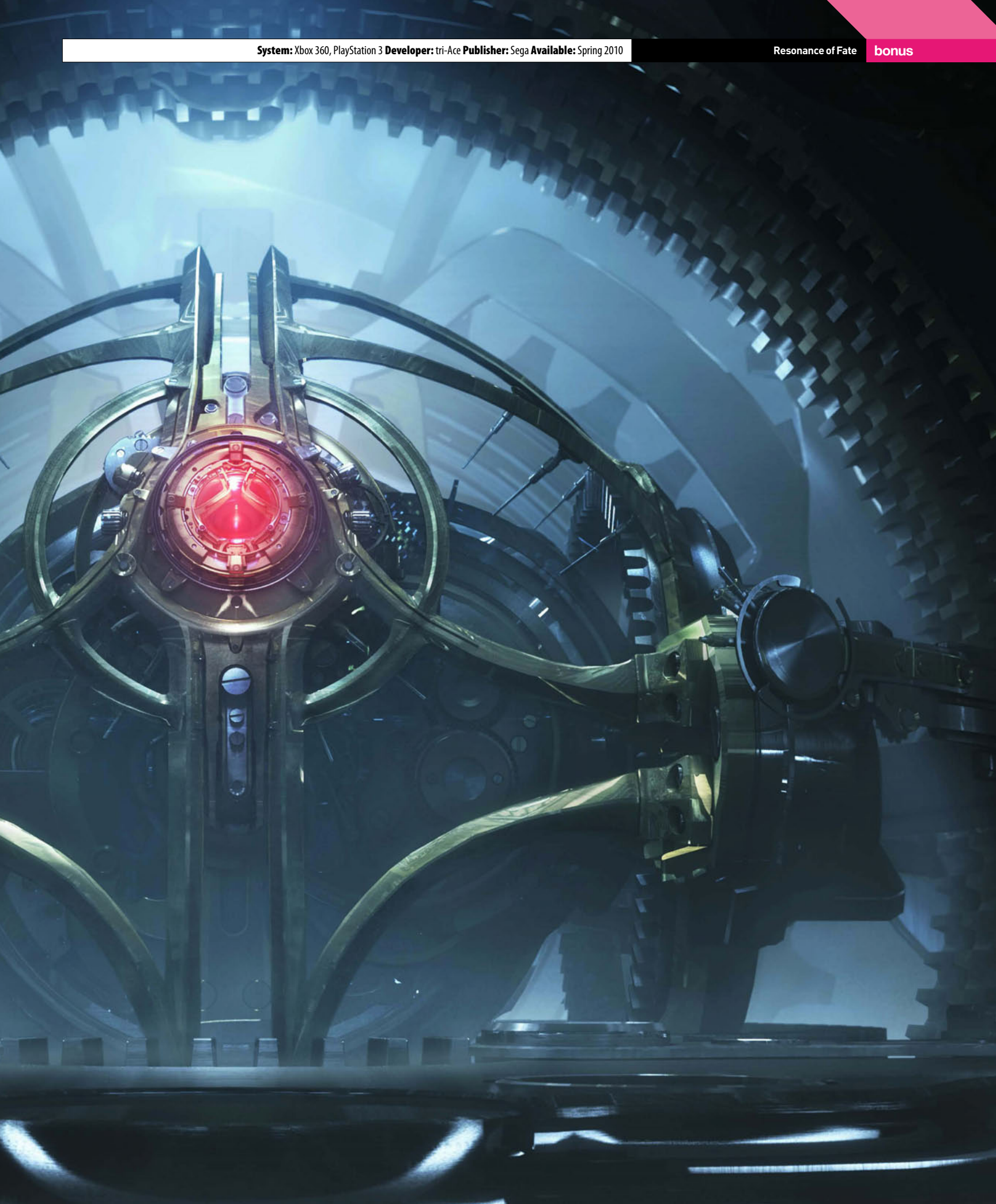
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Resonance of Fate

bonus



bonus

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Resonance of Fate

bonus









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